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My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister are Completely Overshadowed by the Incredible Thing that Showed Up…Which One is it This Time?

[Contents]

- Illustration
- Chapter 0
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Afterword
- ?
- Credits

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Chapter 0

[keep watch] User Warning [from the ghost cat]

- This project includes violent imagery and gruesome scenes. However, it is a necessary endeavor to protect the world.

Chapter 0

“Kh…”

My mind was fuzzy. Where was I? The floor was oddly close by, so had I fallen over? But it didn’t feel like I was lying face-down. My vision was situated low to the floor, but it was not angled at all. It was almost like I had been buried upright with just my head sticking out.

“Oh, Satori-kun. Did you come to?”

“Class Rep?”

I responded to the girl’s voice I heard from nearby. I did indeed see a familiar silhouette standing by the wall.

The air was awfully dusty, the floor and walls were damaged here and there, and the atmosphere was damp and gloomy. Some light was leaking in through a thick curtain, so it must not have been night. This place had to be like this year-round, but that was why the familiar girl’s voice soothed my heart so much.

The Class Rep was wearing her usual glasses, her headband that pushed up her long black hair and left her forehead bare, and her blazer-style school uniform. But her skirt was a little short. And since I was on the floor… *Wait, you’re way too close! Are you not even paying attention!! What is with this angle? I can see up your skirt…and I can even see the small ribbon on that white cloth! I-I can’t believe it! Ahh! Class Rep, ahhhh!!*

“I’m glad you came to, Satori-kun. Here.”

“Don’t crouch down, Class Rep! I can see everything! And why are you placing your soft hands around my face!? No, wait! If you lift me up like that, my face will go right into your chest!!”

My adolescent mind began panicking with everything going on here, but I still managed to notice that something was wrong.

Ahn? She isn’t gathering her strength to pick me up… It’s like she’s easily lifting up just *my head like a soccer…ball…?*

“C-Class Rep, wait a second. Is it just me or am I unnaturally light? I mean, there’s something wrong with my physical weight. Or…”

I trailed off.

The Class Rep picked my head up with both hands and tilted her head curiously. I caught sight of something in her small face. Or more accurately, in the lenses of her glasses.

It should have been my face reflected there.

But, um, this was weird.

All I saw reflected there was a gigantic garlic about the size of a human head!

“Wait! What? Um, wh-wh-wh-what is this, Class Rep?”

“Shh. Satori-kun, not so loud.”

“You’re acting like I’m being unreasonable here, but I’ve turned into a giant garlic without a face or a body! I mean, why aren’t you questioning this? Am I the only one that finds this surreal as hell!?”

“Oh, honestly. This is…oh, no. Did she hear all the noise? This way.”

“I still haven’t processed the first stage, so don’t just move onto the

next- mghmgh!!”

O-oh, no. The Class Rep held me to her chest, so my mouth was sealed by those two divine mounds that were smallish but had an incredible presence, but what was going on? Did she just climb under the bed while my endorphins were pumping!?

“C-Class Rep, on top of the bed would have been one thing, but climbing under the bed is certainly a unique choice. Well, I’m willing to try it that way if you-…”

“Shh. Be quiet. It’s all over if she notices us.”

A moment later, I heard a noise.

It was a wet noise like dragging a thick cloth along the floor after soaking it in rotten water.

That blew all questions and excitement out of my mind. It was like how you might want to have a few words with a masked man who breaks into your house but your mind would go blank when he threatened you with a knife.

That was how it made me feel.

That odd sound was something I had to stay utterly focused on, just like the glinting tip of a knife.

“…”

Under the bed, the Class Rep did not provide any further explanation. She probably couldn’t. I was still contained in her soft arms and I sensed her cold sweat and erratic heartbeat more than her sweet scent.

And the sound…

That sound of a dragging wet cloth…

This was bad. It wasn't leaving. It was not moving from in front of the door. Then I heard the clattering of scraping metal. Was someone…messing with the doorknob? I tried to look up at the Class Rep's face, but she said nothing and did not even return eye contact. That confirmed my fear: the door was not locked. In fact, this was someone who could not be kept out with a locked door. And a locked door would only gather their attention. That had kept her from trying to hole up in this room.

It opened. The room's door creaked open. But it did not feel like any fresh air entered the cramped room. In fact…what was this? Simply calling it sweet didn't do it justice. It was a mass of a sickly sweet aroma that seemed to make the air sticky. It was probably a rose scent or something similar, but it was so powerful it was like an assault on the senses. If I had to ride an elevator filled with the aroma, I would probably pass out and crumble to the floor before reaching my destination.

I desperately tried to gather information from the limited view I had from below the bed.

Whoever it was seemed to be barefoot. Their footsteps sounded awfully light on the floor. They may have been a girl. I couldn't tell what she looked like or what she was wearing, but I could see the long cloth that was dragging along the floor.

The way she walked suggested she did not have a set destination in mind.

She slowly walked irregularly around the small room.

I realized where the smell was coming from.

Something dripped to the floor in tune with her light pace. It was

brightly colored. Seeing it felt a lot like watching the blooming of a lovely flower, but was it…blood?

“…!?”

I just about cried out, but the Class Rep suppressed it by holding my garlic head tightly to herself. Meanwhile, the wandering person continued to move.

There was a great tremor.

As soon as I realized she had climbed onto the bed, the destructive shaking continued like she was having a fit of anger. This was the result of illogical, incoherent, and violent thoughts like someone jumping around and stomping their feet in frustration that things weren’t going their way. It was like someone cursing and throwing a nearby flower pot against the wall after stubbing their little toe on the corner of their dresser. But this told me something, even if I had no concrete proof.

That bestial roar from directly above gripped my soul.

I knew we could not let her find us.

It was a stinging sort of confusion. It was how you froze in place if you were riding an elevator alone late at night and were suddenly joined by a man holding a grass-cutting sickle and muttering to himself. This was broken. It was not at all normal. The standard motives like hatred, pleasure, or profit did not matter. Once this saw you, you would be killed like a stuffed animal having its stuffing torn out and it would be for an uglier and muddier reason that could not be described with words!

As the girl raged atop the mattress and springs, I also heard what must have been a liquid dripping down due to her violent movements. The oppressive and unbelievably sweet smell grew

even harsher. My garlic body did not have eyes or ears, but my vision blurred regardless. What felt like the back of my “eyes” hurt. If I was feeling like this, the Class Rep had to be gagging and struggling to breathe.

Blood.

Rose blood.

I had heard of potable perfumes that used a special arrangement of herbs to intentionally alter your scent since what you ate would alter your body’s smell. But how could it change this much? Surely not even using an IV to directly pump your veins full of bathroom air fresher would have this much of an effect!

I shuddered and the childish tantrum on the bed ended. No, she had gotten carried away and rolled right off the bed. It made a loud thud, but I was not about to feel sorry for her. She was far too frightening for that.

And more importantly, this introduced a pressing problem.

She had rolled off. She was collapsed on the floor. A girl in a red… yes, a bloody dress was squirming on the floor with her legs and butt pointed our way, but she was down on our eye level now. If her rusty silver hair swayed and she turned this way, she would see us below the bed!!

Go away.

Just leave.

Don’t worry about what’s behind you!

Don’t ask any weird questions and just leave!!

The red-stained dress writhed as her fingers and toes kept slipping

in her own pool of blood.

She's not…standing up!?

Is it all over!?

"…"

But the Class Rep did not move. She remained silent and kept holding my garlic head to her chest.

The girl moved.

She must have decided standing up would be too much effort because she dragged her red-stained body along. I could hear the sound of dragging wet cloth. She made her way to the room's door, stuck her slender fingers through the gap, pushed it open, and entered the hallway headfirst.

I couldn't move for a while.

I seriously thought I would find the bloody dress girl smiling back from just outside the door the instant we relaxed and crawled out from below the bed.

The Class Rep must have been the same.

She did not move out from the bed, but she did whisper to me.

"(Looks like she's gone.)"

"(C-Class Rep? What was that???)"

When I asked that far-too-obvious question, the Class Rep relaxed her shoulders just a bit and answered.

"(I thought you would know more about those than me, Satori-

kun.)”

“(…?)”

I was confused, so my childhood friend continued.

“(A vampire. I don’t know why, but she seems to be wandering around this abandoned hospital, the old Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital.)”

With that, some things clicked into place.

Although there were still plenty of questions, like why the Class Rep and I were in that abandoned hospital and why I had turned into a garlic head. But most of the signs…no, symbols seemed to fit together.

We had an extremely large stage.

I had the Class Rep as a flag I could not afford to lose.

We had the vampire as an absolutely powerful foe.

And there was the garlic.

…Wasn’t that one of the most famous weaknesses of vampires, right alongside sunlight and crosses?

“M-Maxwell!! These settings are all messed up! It’s bugged to hell! Have I been thrown into some surreal game space where I have to play as a goat or a slice of brea-…mgh!?”

“Shh! Can you not learn, Satori-kun!? Make too much noise and she’ll come back!!”

I had discovered a new rule: make a lot of noise and the Class Rep would unconditionally hold me tightly to her chest. But if I went too

far, we would encounter that bloody dress girl. *Don't set up death traps in such weird places!? Are you a monster!? Sniff, sniff!!*

And the desperately roleplaying Class Rep had more to say:

"Also, Satori-kun. I don't think there's much point in bringing up Maxwell now. Our phones don't have a signal."

……
……

Wait, hold on.

My mind was growing blank, so there was one thing I had to ask before I all-out panicked.

Wait, wait, wait!!

"C-Class Rep…?"

"What is it, Satori-kun?"

"Th-this is some bizarre game space created by Maxwell, my disaster environment simulator, right? I mean, how else can you explain that I'm garlic, that we're in an abandoned hospital, and that there's an invincible monster in a bloody dress!?"

Are we on earth? I had thought it was as simple a question as that. There was only one possible answer.

But an awkward silence followed. It might not have actually lasted even a full second, but it felt horribly out of place like a slight lag in an otherwise smooth video.

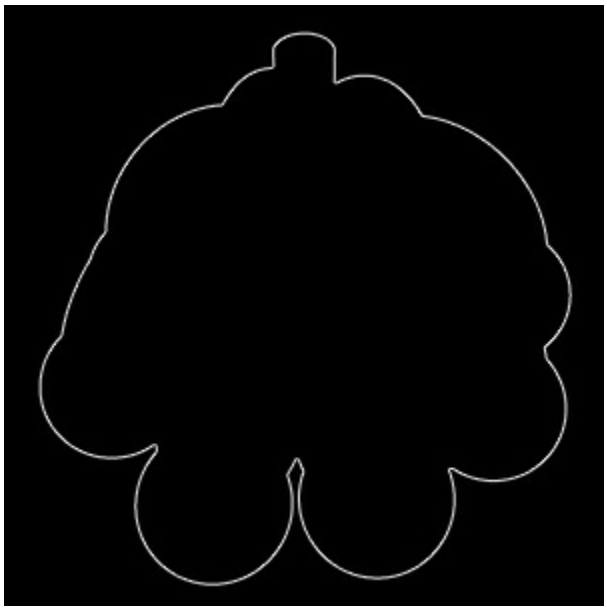
And her words delivered the final blow.

"What are you talking about?"

Ah, ahhh…

Am I in real trouble this time!?

Garlic



Maxwell: My user's second form and an anti-Archenemy biological weapon with especially powerful effects against vampires. Incidentally, its sterilizing properties mean it is viewed favorably by Miss Ayumi, the zombie who uses so many preservatives on a daily basis.

Garlic comes in a variety of forms, but in my user's case, it appears to have eight cloves. However, the garlic is extremely large, it can roll on its own, and it rapidly grows further bulbs while buried in dirt. None of this can be explained using the traits of the normal perennial plant of the Liliaceae family, so is this silhouette really garlic…?

[keep watch] Research Regarding Garlic [from the ghost cat]

The most famous vampire weaknesses are sunlight, a wooden stake, and garlic. There are actually plenty of others, such as fire, sacramental bread, holy water, silver weapons, etc., but I think those three are the ones most people will think of.

Compared to sunlight and a wooden stake, garlic does not seem very holy or powerful and it even seems kind of silly, but if you read the world's most-famous vampire novel which is somewhat biased about blood transfusions, you will find that garlic is used as a convenient tool. Not only does a necklace made from garlic flowers keep the vampire away, but it is also used to protect a home. And it seems the *actual* hunters use it in similar ways.

As an additional note, the idea that vampires immediately turn to ashes when exposed to direct sunlight is only found in later movie adaptations. The novel only has the vampire weakened during the day. And driving a stake through the heart is not absolute; after the stake, you have to chop off the head and stuff garlic in the mouth.

…The vampire Archenemy we will be seeing today actually does turn to ashes in sunlight and dies instantly from a stake through the heart. Discussing that can get into "chicken or the egg" territory, but garlic is still a necessary component when facing them. Any who mock the old traditions will find themselves in tears later on.

Chapter 1

Part 1

(Garlic Count: 1)

I had to think about the environment I found myself in and what I could do.

“Your memories seem confused.”

“Well, can you blame me when I’ve turned into garlic!? I have no idea how I ended up here!”

The Class Rep sat on the bloody room’s bed and she placed my round garlic body on her lap.

“First, this is an old convalescent hospital on the border of our Kukyou City and the neighboring city. It’s deep in the forest, so you wouldn’t even know it’s there except for satellite images from something like Mobile Earth. It’s a bit of a mystery why they would build a hospital here, but it may have been for patients who didn’t want to be seen. It ran into difficulties and the director and the rest of the management went missing like they had skipped town, so all the rusted medical equipment was left here.”

I was actually more interested in why I was a garlic, but I guess she had to go over things in order. And I wasn’t about to complain when it was the nice-smelling Class Rep and I was resting on her lap! Rub, rub!!

“We received permission from school and the government office to come here and investigate what happened. It was for social studies. We wanted to know why the hospital couldn’t stay in business and why it hasn’t been demolished. The idea was to do some

investigation, announce the results in class, and learn how difficult the world of adults can be."

"A secret hospital kept out of view and the management went missing like they had skipped town? That doesn't sound quite so simple."

Especially with that bloody dress girl wandering around. If she had something to do with the old hospital, then it was possible the disappearance of the director and the rest of the management had not been them running away in the night.

Were they buried somewhere around here?

Or were they lurking in the shadows just like that bloody dress girl?

Those options seemed entirely possible.

"Ah ha ha. Looking back on it, yes. But our teacher and the government worker didn't seem too worried about it. They immediately okayed the idea. If it was really dangerous, they would have stopped us, right? Or so we thought. But we were wrong. The truly frightening things are hidden so that no one knows they're there. Why didn't I realize that no one would be caught by a trap if they could predict it was there?"

I can't believe this.

My older sister Erika was a vampire, so what did that make this? A neighbor? A turf rival? To be honest, I doubted that bloody dress girl would just leave if I used my sister's name. For one thing, I wasn't even sure she could understand human language. And I wasn't about to test it.

She was somehow different from Erika or my little sister Ayumi. Archenemies and the immortal were just girls, weren't they? But I

couldn’t see anything like that here.

She was a pure monster.

If she sensed us with her eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or skin, we would lose our lives. We were surrounded by the atmosphere of pure night where we could not afford to run across something like that.

After thinking through all that, I asked the most fundamental question of all.

“…What do we do?”

“Good question.” The Class Rep kept my giant garlic body on her lap. “First of all, we can’t defeat that. I’m not saying that from a moral or humane standpoint; it’s simply physically impossible. We might be able to temporarily scare her off, trip her, or guide her in the wrong direction, but there is simply no way to defeat her and settle this once and for all.”

I produced a gulping noise, even though I wasn’t sure my garlic body even had a throat or saliva.

“B-but. But we can’t just continue hiding here, can we? That won’t solve anything.”

“Ah ha ha. True enough. We can’t call for help since our phones don’t have a signal. And even if our teacher or the government office would come looking for us when we didn’t return…if they enter the hospital without being warned first, they’ll just suffer the same fate. I don’t think we can count on help from outside. In fact, that might actually increase the number of vampires.”

With that, the Class Rep held garlic me between her soft hands and lifted me up. She got up from the bed and approached the wall of

the room…which I now realized was a dusty hospital room.

She actually approached the window covered by a light-blocking curtain.

“Look.”

She opened the edge of the curtain just a crack and placed me in the sunlight stabbing in.

We were quite high up. It looked like the third or maybe fourth floor. But this was no time to stare at the green sea spreading out below.

“The sun is still high in the sky. If we could get out of the hospital, I don’t think that vampire would be able to pursue us.”

“True. But, Class Rep, doesn’t that mean the opposite as well?”

“Yes.”

The Class Rep likely didn’t want to say it out loud. But to share our information, I took on that unpleasant task.

“If we don’t get out of here before the sun sets…the vampire *can* pursue us outside. In that case, there would be no saving us. We’d be caught in the forest before we reached the city.”

Part 2

(Garlic Count: 1)

It turned out I could do a surprising lot as a garlic.

“Oh.”

I left the Class Rep’s hands and rolled along the floor. I was only a garlic body with no hands or feet, but it was like I could control my center of gravity. It felt like there was a small metal ball inside a larger, hollow ball and I could move that to roll in any direction.

Controlling that small metal ball seemed to be the key to movement. By making it bounce upwards, I could jump. As high as the Class Rep’s navel seemed to be my limit.

“But how are we supposed to fight that bloody dress girl like this? Just being in the same room as her was enough for me to freeze up. It wouldn’t be possible even if I had mastered Chinese marital arts, learned *qigong*, and could split a boulder with a piece of newspaper.”

“But, Satori-kun, don’t they often say that garlic is a vampire’s weakness?”

“But how are we supposed to use that garlic, my kitten?”

“Umm, throw it at her?”

“Throw…!?”

“Or how about grating it and spreading it across the floor? Maybe that would create a sort of barrier.”

“Wait, wait, wait! First of all, I feel like we’re just throwing my basic human rights out in the trash! You can’t treat me carelessly just because I’m garlic. You need to take good care of me. There’s still a single life inside me!”

“But, Satori-kun, didn’t you multiply before?”

“Hm…hmm???”

“Y’know, if we stick you in a flowerpot, give you water, and open the curtain to let sunlight shine on you, then you start to flower…”

“No, wait. I don’t remember any of this!”

Where was I trying to go?

But I wanted to know everything my garlic body could do. And if my garlic body had multiplied without my knowledge, what had happened to them? Regardless, I wanted to try it out.

“There isn’t a flowerpot in this room, is there?” asked the Class Rep.

“Eh?”

“I think there was a withered houseplant at the nurse station. The building’s water isn’t running, but the fire hydrant on the third floor was broken and the wall-…”

“If it’s gonna be that kind of pain-in-the-ass quest, then forget it! You wait here, Class Rep. We’re up against a zombie, so a normal human like you would be at the most risk just wandering around.”

But if garlic like me moved to the corner of the hall, the vampire might walk right past me, assuming I was garbage. Not that I wanted to test it out if I could avoid it.

So I rolled toward the door, leaving the Class Rep in the hospital room. The floor was covered in sweet blood, like someone had been dragging a dirty mop around. It was disgusting, but I couldn't complain. I left through the cracked door and entered the hallway.

It was just as dimly lit. I had to rely on the slight light that made it in through the windows sealed by curtains and wooden boards.

And it was far more cluttered than I had expected.

Several filthy buckets were lined up and rusted metal racks were piled up along one side of the hallway. The stairway leading down was completely blocked by garbage at one point. I couldn't rely on the map on the wall. The place had become something of a labyrinth. There were no cigarette butts and no spray paint graffiti. No one must have bothered coming to this inconvenient place just for fun.

"Is that the nurse station?"

But it was not difficult to find where I wanted to go. Unless the designer had not known what they were doing, the nurse station would be located at the intersection of several halls. In other words, where the most people would pass through. It was best to place it at that "prime traffic point" so they could immediately reach a patient needing help and observe people's comings and goings.

"Still…"

There was indeed a flowerpot on the counter. It only had some brown and withered leaves inside, though. But how was I supposed to carry it? I apparently needed water and sunlight as well.

"Let's see."

I moved right up to the counter and jumped straight up as a garlic. I could reach the height of the Class Rep's navel, so I could just barely jump up onto the counter.

But…

"I don't have any arms or legs, so I guess all I can do is push it."

The flowerpot was ceramic, so it would probably break if I dropped it. There was nothing I could do.

Man, being a giant garlic was really inconvenient. If I really could multiply my body like the Class Rep said, I might be able to push it down from above while catching it from below.

I took a break as I thought about that. And when I looked down from the counter…

"Oh."

I spoke without thinking.

Even if the one on the counter was hopeless, there was something else I could use. There was a large bucket-like pot meant more for a "tree" than a flower at the end of a row of benches in the waiting area in front of the nurse station.

And it had a large plate-like thing below it. That plate was wet. It was meant to catch water. That water would have been dangerous for a person to drink, but that shouldn't matter when it came to wetting some dirt. The Class Rep's information was not all that reliable. I was just about to run around on an unnecessary quest while that strange bloody dress girl was wandering around. I decided to complain to the Class Rep later and have her let me rub all over her!

I hopped down from the counter and rolled along the floor. The

large pot and the nearby windowsill were both easy enough to jump onto. I had trouble pulling on the thick curtain, but I managed it by placing my round garlic body between the glass and the curtain and slowly moving along the windowsill.

Pant, pant. Moving a single curtain was a lot of work. I really missed my human body. In fact, I still didn't know why I had become garlic. Had a wicked witch cast a spell on me? In that case, would I not return to normal unless the sexy forehead glasses Class Rep princess kissed me? *Pant, pant!!*

"There."

At any rate, the pot was what mattered now.

Like a move theater projector, the sunbeam shined through the dusty air and onto the dirt. As expected, it was damp. It had a bit of a sour smell, but I could hardly complain since I was garlic.

…What did it feel like to multiply?

Even if I did multiply, it would only mean creating giant, pumpkin-like garlics, but it was still strange to think about. I couldn't fully backup Maxwell due to his specs, so not even that program had experienced this.

But…huh?

Wait a second.

I have a giant garlic body, but aren't I only round because of the few cloves gathered together? Multiplying doesn't mean for this round body to spit apart into 4 or 8 pieces and scatter the contents arou-… agagagagagagagagah!?

Part 3

(Garlic Count: 8)

I nearly lost consciousness.

In fact, I wasn't entirely sure I hadn't. Was this really the same garlic as before? This garlic led me to ponder the same questions as with a teleportation device.

"Oh, come on…"

The remains of a giant and split garlic sat at the center of the pot. And it was surrounded by eight identical giant garlics, including myself. Was that one dead? But wait. The other garlics would not move like I wanted them to. I tried thinking "right" and "left" and they moved accordingly. Controlling them each individually was as difficult as opening and closing individual toes, but if I focused, I could manage. I tried lining them up on the floor.

As I looked down from the pot, I was convinced.

This was not copying my mind as well. I could mass-produce the garlic bodies, but there was only one "me", the mind controlling them. So the me that had split apart there and the me that was here now were the same. The file was being moved, not copied.

Which meant…

"Wow. It's like having infinite 1-ups! All I need is water, dirt, and sunlight, which isn't all that difficult to get. I can make as many as I want. What does it matter if I'm garlic? If it can multiply a thousand or even a million fold, even a 10,000 yen note can kill someone.

And I’m garlic, so I can hold back a vampire! Ah ha ha ha ha!!”

In that case, I had to focus on increasing my numbers. I didn’t want to repeat that sensation of my head splitting open, but oh well. One garlic was clearly in control, but the pain reached me equally. I crammed all of them inside the bucket-like pot and they all burst out like popcorn.

Pop, pop, pop, pop.

But it was really picking up speed. Each one did more than just double, so the waiting room would be filled in no time at all. At this rate, I would really be able to create a garlic avalanche.

…*Splat.*

“Ah.”

My garlic head heard a wet sound. And one of my sensations was instantly blown away. Why hadn’t I realized it? When playing hide-and-seek, increasing your numbers only made you stand out. And I was garlic. Why didn’t you think about the smell, you complete moron!?

I slowly turned around.

As expected, the bloody dress girl appeared from the darkness. And before I could even think about rolling to the left or right, her claws swung toward my head like lightni-

Part 4

(Garlic Count: 300)

“Waaaa

sure I didn't stand out this time.

The unpleasant sounds of something being smashed, sliced, or even crushed came from all over.

Dammit, did she just tear apart that steel fire door like it was wet paper!?

"…!?"

But I wasn't the only one that was afraid. That bloody dress vampire recoiled when she was hit by the unique-smelling juice that splattered from the dead garlic. It really did seem to be working on her. Even if I couldn't defeat her, I could knock her back. That rising hope drove the pain and fear even further from my mind. If I could interfere with her movements, I could get my lifeline garlic away from here!

And once I knew that…

"Men, attack!!"

I cried out like I was raising the fan held by a sumo referee. The scattered garlics rushed at the vampire as a group. They had no arms or legs, but they could roll and jump as high as the Class Rep's navel. If they got close enough, they could hop up and tackle the vampire.

Of course, it wasn't that easy to hit her. Most of them were turned into diced garlic by a whirlwind of claws. But that was fine. The juice that splattered on her in place of blood would do damage to her. *Ah ha ha! How do you like being coated in my bodily fluid! L-look the other way and complain that it smells!!*

"Oh."

A few of the garlics got too close and slipped below the bloody

dress's skirt. I was a step away, but I could see what they saw like an image you pictured in your mind while walking and thinking at the same time.

When the skirt group looked up, I could see that even her panties were soaked red. It was a little much, but that was a perfectly lewd image! But I showed no mercy. I finally had a chance to tackle her. *Jump, everyone, before she can stomp on you!! Attack her together!!*

"…Gh…!?"

When the multiple hits flew up at her, the bloody dress was knocked upwards.

This was my chance.

To reiterate, I could not defeat the vampire. My goal was to allow at least one of the garlics to escape safely. I could replenish my lives later. What mattered now was to leave one of them alive.

The bloody dress girl was focused on the garlics hopping around inside her skirt, so her gaze was directed straight down. The floor and walls were coated with the Special Satori Juice from the crushed garlics. If the entire area had become a toxic swamp for her, she would have difficulty pursuing.

She wouldn't notice if I acted now.

This was my chance to escape.

I was located on the ground a step away, but I rolled away and left the rest to the ones still there.

Part 5

(Garlic Count: 21)

I knew what I could do.

If I created too many garlics, it was difficult to move them individually. And if their scent or presence grew too great, they would be noticed.

But if I created a smaller unit of elites, I could handle even that hopeless wandering monster. While one made a commotion and drew the attention of the bloody dress girl, another could escape along with the Class Rep.

…There were two things to keep in mind.

First, it didn't matter how many times I was killed, but I couldn't let my number of remaining lives fall to zero. Second, there was only one Class Rep. She had no extra lives, so I could not allow her to even be scratched.

I could die to protect her.

Huh? That sounds awfully badass for a garlic.

"…Class Rep?"

Or so I thought before I ran across the next bit of trouble.

When I returned to the old hospital room, I couldn't find the Class Rep anywhere.

"Class Rep!? Damn!"

Just to be sure, I checked below the bed, but there was no sign of my forehead glasses childhood friend. I may have been garlic, but I felt impatience burning at the back of my head.

But wait. I had to calm down. I had just stopped the bloody dress girl with my garlic army. I doubted the Class Rep had been taken out by her. This was still dangerous, but there was still hope. My first priority was finding her as she continued her dangerous one-girl expedition.

But then an unpleasant thought occurred to me.

"…Why am I so certain that the bloody dress girl is the only vampire?"

If the bloody dress girl could make more of her by biting people, there might be other victims. What had happened to the hospital's management who had suddenly disappeared like they had skipped town? The Class Rep had said we were investigating something for school, but was it really just the two of us? If we were working in a larger group and other students or a teacher were here too, then where had they gone???

This was bad.

The garlic army's strength was their ability to fight as a group, but this changed the difficulty level. Even if I could draw the bloody dress girl's attention to one spot, there was nothing we could do if there was another vampire blocking the other route. Since we couldn't view everything from overhead like on a GPS map, the piles of trash blocking the corridors and stairways had turned the hospital into a life-sized labyrinth where any turn could lead to a literal dead-end. If we ran across a vampire and fled, we could end up in a dead-end or caught between two vampires. That would eliminate any chance of reversing the situation.

I couldn’t let the Class Rep be taken out.

The “other viewpoints” in a corner of my mind and the pain arriving remotely had all vanished. The garlic army holding back the bloody dress girl had apparently been wiped out. Now I was back to a single life and she could freely wander the abandoned hospital.

But I had to do this.

Only I, the giant round garlic, could protect the Class Rep from the vampire.

Part 6

(Garlic Count: 1)

Now, where was I supposed to search for the Class Rep? I realized I had yet to go around to the entire floor.

That said, I could not randomly search all of the rooms while shouting the Class Rep's name. That bloody dress girl was still on the same floor. If I was killed now, I would lose my last life. I wanted to keep my risk of death to a minimum.

What would I do?

How could I find the best answer?

I thought as I rolled across the hospital room's floor. For one thing, why had she left the hospital room now? She had immediately hid below the bed and held her breath just from hearing a noise, so she would have wanted to avoid an adventure if at all possible. And while the room was splattered with blood from the bloody dress girl's tantrum, there was no other sign of damage.

So it may not have been that she fled because another vampire had shown up.

…But if she chose to leave, then why? Had she needed food or water? Had she heard cries for help from another survivor? Had she looked out the window and seen someone approaching the building? It was no use. It was all speculation without any actual evidence to back it up.

It looked like I would have to head out and investigate myself.

I poked half of the garlic out through the cracked door once more. There was…no one in the hallway. The room was hardly a safe zone, but this felt like heading into the dangerous “outside”.

“Oh?”

I hadn’t noticed before, but I noticed some interesting things when I looked at the dusty floor again: footprints. What looked like a red mop being dragged along the floor was the bloody dress girl and the narrow line was from me rolling along, but I also saw small footprints leaving the hospital room and heading in a different direction.

“The Class Rep?”

I decided to roll in that direction. But this was dangerous. If the bloody dress girl had also seen the footprints and pursued her prey, the person trying to hide would have an overwhelming disadvantage. I could only pray she was not smart enough to do that.

And I found another odd thing before reaching the creator of the footprints.

“?”

A white powder drew out a circle with a diameter of about a meter in the center of the hallway. It looked kind of like a magic circle. I hesitantly approached it. The powder…seemed to be normal chalk for a blackboard. This felt more like a good-luck charm than a sign for demolition work.

But with this, I felt like I had gathered a number of puzzle pieces.

A large abandoned building, a wandering zombie, and a chalk circle. I knew a legend that fit those conditions.

“The Polish Vampire Princess.”

I remembered my vampire older sister reading me a picture book about it long ago.

The fairy tale princess had oddly never had her name given.

“A beautiful princess lived in a castle. But the princess lived such a selfish and luxurious lifestyle that she earned the resentment of the people. She fell victim to a powerful curse and she turned into a vampire.”

At the time, I had wondered if all vampires, including my sister, were queen-like people with sexy proportions.

“Night after night, the Vampire Princess wandered the castle and turned her fangs against her servants and knights.”

That lifestyle had made me think of a spider. She never left her own territory, she set up a web and preyed on those who entered it, and she used her own beauty and circumstances as bait.

“There was only one way to save the princess. While she was wandering, you had to find the coffin located somewhere in the castle, seal the lid, and never let her enter it again. The coffin was the source of the curse and its effects cannot replenish inside her as long as she does not sleep inside it. So if she was shut out for a set period of time, the princess would return to being a normal human.”

That was a fair bit different from other legends.

Even after spending a long time as a vampire, she could be returned to normal if the proper process was followed. That was a favor not heard of in other stories.

“However, that was no easy task. After all, the castle was like a

complex labyrinth and the Vampire Princess was immune to all attacks. There was no way to defeat her before locating the coffin deep inside the castle. If she found you, it was all over. The one and only way to survive was to draw a circle on the floor with white chalk. The Vampire Princess could not see you if you were inside there. Just like Hoichi the Earless. Thus, the only option was to head deep into the castle while playing a deadly game of hide-and-seek."

My sister giving a Japanese comparison had confused my young mind a fair bit. I couldn't stop picturing a Buddhist monk challenging a princess in a dress.

"By the way, this was apparently the sort of story where the knight who returned the princess to normal got to marry her later on. Kyah!"

My garlic movement came to a stop when I remembered that.

"Why did Erika tell me that story?"

But if that was the setup here, the bloody dress girl would have a coffin somewhere in the abandoned hospital. If I could find that before I was defeated, I would win. This wasn't part of the world's most famous piece of vampire literature, but as a garlic, I could probably coat the coffin lid with my juices to act as a seal. I didn't know how many there were, but that would likely allow all of the survivors to escape the hospital alive.

But this vampire had to be a fairly strong one. There were a lot of different kinds of vampires, but a Polish Vampire Princess probably wouldn't die if you drove a stake through her heart. Sunlight might slow her down, but it wouldn't annihilate her. After all, she received an endless supply of energy as long as the coffin existed as a source for the curse. Sucking blood was secondary. Her fingernails could shred through garlic and even steel fire doors like wet paper. If she could continue that kind of destruction at full power

indefinitely, she might be stronger as an individual than Erika who was feared as a Queen-class. Group destruction of a city was a different matter, though. She seemed odd for a vampire and it felt like she was wandering around, unable to control herself, but that might have been due to the unending supply of energy.

“And the Class Rep didn’t have any chalk.”

I spoke it aloud because it was so important.

Since this chalk circle existed in the hallway, I had to assume the survivors were familiar with the story. So why had the Class Rep hidden below the hospital room’s bed? Why hadn’t she drawn a large circle on the floor?

Probably because she had run out of chalk.

She hadn’t even had a little bit left.

The amount of chalk was like her extra lives. Not being able to draw a circle brought death closer. She would only be able to rely on the few safe zones that already existed. How frightening had it been to be unable to draw a circle if she needed to? That meant she had gone out into the dangerous hallway while still in that situation.

“…Wait.”

That may have been why she had disappeared. Had she gone to collect some more chalk to act as extra lives, or had she sensed danger and fled to somewhere with an existing chalk circle? Looking at it that way, I could understand why she left that small room which was not a 100% safe zone even behind the door or under the bed. I had told her to wait for me, but she would have had to move if danger was approaching. We couldn’t secretly contact each other with a cellphone or smartphone now, so we might have just missed each other like that.

…The problem was the existence of this chalk circle near the hospital room and the absence of the Class Rep inside it.

“So did she go looking for more chalk? …But where?”

Had there been any at the nurse station? I didn’t recall a blackboard or chalk there. The schedule and message board had been a whiteboard that used markers. In that case, where would they have a blackboard in a hospital where cleanliness was crucial?

“The rehabilitation room in the pediatric department? They might have it set up like a school. The Class Rep might be there too.”

In that case, I couldn’t blame her. As a garlic, I knew just how much of a difference it meant to have some extra lives in stock.

I decided to search around the pediatric department and to give it more thought if I didn’t find anything.

…I needed to eliminate the most likely option first. I had to follow the small footprints in the dust that ignored the chalk circle and continued down the hall. I would probably find a likely location for chalk at the end of those tracks.

With that, I continued down the hallway.

It was difficult getting past the junk covering the hallway in places and a normal person would have had to turn sideways and press their back against the wall a lot of the time. On the other hand, there was almost nothing that would make a useful tool. There were boards and supports for collapsed steel racks, but it was obvious what would happen if you faced that bloody dress girl with only a piece of wood. She was worse than a man-eating tiger.

There weren’t any pots or watering cans either. It was difficult rolling into the darkness without a chance to increase my number

of extra lives. If I was killed now, it was all over. I wouldn't be able to save the Class Rep either.

I kept that in mind as I rolled on and on. The trail of footprints in the dust seemed to avoid the nurse station and approach the hall where the elevators and emergency stairs were gathered.

But…

"Wait a second," I said after rolling out into the elevator hall. "Where's the Class Rep? Why did the footprints vanish!?"

The footprints in the dust suddenly stopped.

But what had happened here? Had the Class Rep traveled along the wall or ceiling? Had she sprinkled something much like dust to cover her tracks? No, my imagination was completely lacking in reality. The answer wouldn't be anything like that.

I had to think.

No matter what she did, the Class Rep's mass was not going to just disappear here. She must have moved somehow. But where to? If she had gone off somewhere, I had to suspect somewhere with chalk. She might have been afraid of the vampire tracking her down before she acquired those extra lives and thus used some kind of trick. Or what if a third party had done this? My tension grew. For example, what if she had been attacked by a vampire who could crawl along the walls or ceiling? But in that case, the area should be covered in blood. Both from the Class Rep's wounds and from the stifling, rose-smelling blood that dripped from the bloody dress girl.

…Whatever had happened, that vampire may not have been involved.

Supposedly, one way of not leaving any tracks in the jungle was to

wrap several layers of thick cloth around your boots. The Class Rep might have found something in the piles of trash and erased her tracks before heading off again.

At any rate, I had to continue the search.

First, somewhere that might have chalk. I checked the diagram on the elevator hall wall. Two large T-shaped buildings overlapped and an extra bar stuck out from the rectangular peak. This was the fourth floor and it had nothing to do with pediatrics. That was apparently on the third floor.

“But…”

The hospital was not as big as I had expected. It had only five floors and that contained all of the hospital rooms, examination rooms, testing rooms, and operating rooms. Every division necessary for a general hospital was contained in the same space as two school buildings: internal medicine, surgery, ophthalmology, otolaryngology, gynecology, pediatrics, dentistry, cosmetic surgery, psychosomatic medicine, radiology, etc. There was a lot of variation, but the actual number of beds was fairly limited. That meant the cycle of treating patients had to be fairly cramped. And this was deep in the forest, not near a train station. I wasn’t quite sure how hospitals were run, but I could kind of see why the old management might have skipped town.

…A small number of beds, ample services, and a location deep in the forest and away from prying eyes. This may have been a pricy hospital for VIPs. Politicians and corporate executives apparently still could not let the public know if they were severely ill. An athlete might not be able to focus on healing after surgery to their elbow or knee if the media was hanging around.

But why had that bloody dress girl shown up here?

If she was a Polish Vampire Princess, she could not leave on her own and find a new haunt. She had to stay with the cursed coffin. That would mean the coffin had been carried here.

For one thing, who was she?

If the coffin was the source of the curse, she would have been a normal human to begin with. She had turned into that once she was cursed. In that case, who had she been originally and how had she been procured?

“Questions, questions, nothing but questions…”

Even if I didn’t understand, I couldn’t just stop here. I stored the unanswered questions in a corner of my mind and rolled toward the emergency stairs to the side of the unmoving elevator. The stairway leading up was entirely blocked by the trash piled up taller than a person on the landing, but the stairs down were clear and I could get to the third floor where the pediatric department was.

The area looked little different, but there was a sign of a struggle on the dusty floor. Something had made a mess of the dust and left behind bloodstains and a rosy scent. I wouldn’t have been able to follow any footprints even if the trail had continued.

I checked the diagram to see where the pediatric department was. The rehabilitation room was right next to it.

I found a pot in the hallway. I opened the curtain to let sunlight in and I buried myself in the dirt.

My head split open and I became eight of myself.

Needless to say, they were all giant garlics. I was relieved to have some extra lives again. The army of garlics rolled toward the rehabilitation room in question.

The rehabilitation room next to the pediatric department was in an awful state.

This was not just the flow of time. There were clear signs of destruction. The tables were broken and the chairs had been crushed and thrown, so I had no idea how they had originally been arranged. There were also shards of glass lying around. But not from a window. They seemed to have come from cups. Broken and shattered chalk stained the floor.

…Had that bloody dress girl done this?

No, it might have been survivors fighting over the extra lives. It looked like it had been left like this for a long time. The pieces of chalk on the floor were coated with dust. Even if the Class Rep had come here, it didn't look like she had had any luck. The exhaustion may have caught up to her when she saw this result.

I doubted she had visited here several times.

Just to be sure, I checked the pediatric examination room next door, but I wasn't expecting much.

And then I saw it.

A human corpse lay face-down and unmoving.

Part 7

(Garlic Count: 8)

“Ugh…!?”

My garlic head groaned.

It was an elderly man in a pricy-looking suit and wristwatch. He looked older than my dad. He was well-built, but he looked more like a grandfather than a father. There wasn’t much actual blood. His head had split open and about a cup’s worth of dark red liquid had stained the floor. In a drama, I would have wondered how they could know he was really dead.

But even if I wasn’t a doctor, I could tell at a glance. This was a corpse. Without even checking his chest or wrist for a pulse, I knew he was different from us. Mysteries often had the murderer pretend to be a corpse to eliminate themselves from the list of suspects, but that would never work. There was no way you could fake the abnormal presence given off by a corpse.

“…”

And there was one other problem.

He was most certainly dead…but was he going to start moving again? For example, like that bloody dress puppet.

This was dangerous.

Super dangerous.

I had eight lives at the moment. Not all of them had to approach

him. I rolled one garlic over to the rehabilitation room's entrance so it could escape at any time and I chose two of them for the suicide squad. I rolled them slowly over to the unmoving corpse that reminded me of unexploded ordnance.

A stethoscope and a pen holder were scattered around him. They didn't seem solid enough to be the murder weapon. They had probably been strewn about while someone searched for surviving chalk. Had someone already been pursuing him or had they heard the noise? Either way, what he had wanted hadn't been here.

He lay face down and his arm was extended as if to grab something, so I hesitantly touched his fingertip. There was no response. There was no sign of rigor mortis and he was perfectly pliable. Instead of meaning he had just died, it probably meant a long time had passed and the stiffness had gone away. I also detected an odd odor. It was not simply rotting pork or beef and it was not blood either. It was a truly unique stench that could not be compared to anything else: the smell of death. I was truly glad that I gave off a powerful aroma as garlic. If I had to wander around this abandoned hospital reeking of death with no chance of taking a shower or bath, I might have been so bothered by it that I scratched my skin raw.

The corpse was clearly different from a vampire like Erika. I didn't want to speak ill of the dead, but it lacked the unique presence and warmth of a living being. I was overwhelmed by the powerful presence of a mere "thing".

He had to be nothing more than a corpse.

He was not an Archenemy or an immortal.

"Phew…"

But just as I breathed a sigh of relief, a new question occurred to me: Then was it not the bloody dress girl who had done this? Had it

been done by a human who lacked the power to turn him into a vampire? Since he seemed to have been hit by a blunt weapon which was then removed from the crime scene, it did feel more like an act of someone with the intelligence and reason to fear punishment for a crime instead of a rampaging vampire.

But then who had done it?

I didn't know how many people were here. But wasn't the Class Rep one of them?

"You've gotta be kidding me."

I spoke without thinking, even though it was entirely meaningless.

"Maxwell, please tell me this is some cruel simulation. Tell me it's just a game. I've only seen the Class Rep, the bloody dress girl, and some old guy's corpse. Even a cheap murder mystery would have more suspects than that!"

Of course there was no response.

There was only the garlic and the corpse here.

And when I looked to the corpse with despair in my eyes, I found something odd. The old man had died with a small briefcase in his other hand. There was a dark red stain on the corner of the expensive and sturdy-looking leather-covered case. Had he swung it around a few times as a weapon? I didn't know if it was due to that violent usage, but the lock had broken and the case was cracked open.

I stuck the pointed top of the garlic into the crack and pushed it open.

And inside I found…

“A hospital pamphlet, a map, a keyring, a notebook, and an ID card…?”

The last one caught my attention most of all. It had the same hospital logo as the pamphlet. I checked the name and title listed on the card: Director Oniyama Mitsuhiro.

“…”

The small photo was of the dead old man. This had to be him. But in that case, had he really skipped town instead of being killed by the vampire? And had he returned to his abandoned hospital now and had his head split open by someone?

It made no sense. Nothing seemed to fit together. Had he come here of his own free will? Or had he been tracked down and dragged back here? All I found were more questions standing in my way. But based on the ID card equipped with an IC chip, the keyring, the map, and the pamphlet…it kind of looked like he had been searching for something.

A lot it was important, but garlic didn’t have hands or fingers. So to carry the card and keys…

“…I’ll have to stab them into myself.”

Suicide Squad #1 charged forward and pushed at the keyring along with #2. Then the ID card. Fortunately, both objects were hard. They stabbed quite well into Garlic #1. *Ow, ow. Damn, that hurts! This is way too much work. Isn’t there some way to cut off feelings from individual garlics!?*

The injured #2 produced a powerful aroma and wasn’t any help, so after exiting to the hallway, I had it split inside the pot. Gaining too many extra lives would summon the bloody dress girl, so I had the excess wait in the corner of a nearby hospital room. Now even if

the entire army was annihilated, I could move my mind to them and continue. These garlics were pretty good. They were capable garlics.

“The only other thing of interest…would be the notebook, I guess.”

I doubted it would have everything he had been thinking written out in detail, but even fragmentary information would be useful. Especially if it had to do with why he came here and who he planned to meet.

After all, it would be a relief to know there was some other human here.

If someone who knew the dead director was in the abandoned hospital, they were the top suspect. They were much, much more likely to be the murderer than the Class Rep who had just so happened to show up today.

The leather-bound notebook was fastened with a button, but it luckily was not locked. It wasn’t easy flipping over the cover with my garlic head, but I put in the effort.

“?”

I first found a string of numbers. It was a long string, but it wasn’t a phone number. More numbers followed and the amount grew and shrank, so they seemed to have to do with money. It wasn’t as organized as an account book and it looked hurriedly scrawled out.

They had supposedly skipped town, so this did not look very hopeful.

The mountain of numbers suddenly ended and something was written in a nervous-looking handwriting:

“These are your just deserts.”

“It’s what you get for laying a hand on my treasure.”

I had no idea what that meant, but what looked like a map of the hospital was drawn out after it. It looked half-remembered. The details were mostly glossed over and he must have known how little he remembered because it ended partway through.

“I can’t rely on my memories.”

“I need accurate documents to salvage it.”

“…Salvage?”

What had this indebted man been trying to recover from the abandoned hospital? I felt like this kept heading in a darker and darker direction.

Another page had a few photographs held between the pages.

One showed an ebony coffin in a white room. One showed a girl on an examining table with her chest bared. One showed a row of red test tubes. One was a group photo of what looked like doctors and nurses.

“I was shocked it was still moving.”

“No, that’s exactly why I came here.”

…Had he tried to drag out the coffin to sell it? And had he been killed in the process? Had he come into conflict with another group of survivors?

Some of had definitely been written by someone else. There was that opening text and I also saw a few other sentences written as if to disparage someone.

If so, this was bad.

This abandoned hospital might include a few groups of greedy people in addition to the bloody dress girl. There was no guarantee anyone else was any safer than the director collapsed here. If the Class Rep hadn't realized that and she focused too much on the bloody dress girl, she might end up trusting someone she shouldn't.

…And had the Class Rep known about this? If we were acting as a group, what about the other members? That could complicate the situation further.

But there was good news.

For example, I had the keyring and ID card stabbed into Suicide Squad #1. The photos were also important. Especially the ebony coffin. I knew what my target looked like and I wanted to visit that white room seen in the photo.

I used the edge of my garlic head to push open the thin pamphlet I found in the briefcase and I found one location marked with an X in red pen.

It was the "authorized personnel only" zone of the radiology department in the first basement.

…The same pen had written Temporary Storeroom for Discarded Resources next to it.

A normal human would have hesitated. But I was garlic at the moment and I had plenty of extra lives.

"…Okay."

I had lost the Class Rep's trail.

I was afraid that there were multiple survivors and some of them might be greedily in search of money, but the greatest threat had to be the bloody dress girl. Searching the basement for the coffin

may have been the best plan for protecting the Class Rep.

Part 8

(Garlic Count: 15)

The radiology department.

I had never been to one of those, but I could guess it was where they did X-rays and CT scans. I guessed it was underground because it needed to be thickly shielded to keep the X-rays and such from leaking out. Radiation could of course harm living things, but it could also cause machines to malfunction. A hospital was even worried about cellphones, so they would be extra cautious about this kind of thing.

I rolled the garlics down the stairs and found a dark world before me. There were obviously no windows down here and there was no power, so there was no light. That said, it would be too dangerous to search around with a handmade torch when that bloody dress girl was wandering around.

I normally would have given up, but I didn't have to. There was something odd lying on the floor.

"…Glow sticks?"

It was those things everyone waves around at an idol concert. Almost like a trail, they had been placed on the floor at even intervals. They didn't use fire and thus couldn't start one and they could produce light without electricity. They were certainly convenient and whoever had placed them here would be able to follow them back to the stairs. Just like Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs.

…But that level of preparation worried me. It was like someone had been prepared for some exploration from the get-go. I had a feeling this wasn't going to lead me to the Class Rep.

And I didn't really want to find the Class Rep down this way anyway. I couldn't imagine how I would broach the topic.

The glow sticks on the floor led me to the same corridor labelled on the pamphlet as the radiology department. I doubted that was a coincidence. Whoever it was had clearly been making their way to the same place as the director and me.

The darkness scared me.

That was the vampire's territory.

If I hadn't hidden the extra garlics in an empty room on the third floor, I wouldn't have rolled down here no matter how many extra lives I made.

But I did it.

The area around each glow stick glowed with a faint light and barely held the darkness at bay. I ran into several obstacles long the way and my garlic skin was worn down as I continued on as a formation of eight.

Then I found it.

I saw the large double-doors of the radiology department and someone collapsed and leaning up against them.

"…"

It was a young man.

He did not look high school age. He looked gaudy, but he was older

than me.

I was overcome by disgust at the fact that I felt some relief at that, that I was calmly confirming that this was not the Class Rep, and that I felt less of a shock than I had with the previous corpse.

He seemed to have been the one laying out the glow sticks. He must have been in a fight because a shredded knapsack lay next to a pile of glow sticks. And it took me far too long to notice the sickly sweet smell of rose blood left at the crime scene…

He might be “dangerous”.

He was leaning against the door, so I would have to move his corpse to get inside. And he had used his own blood to write something on the door: *Open up.*

“…”

I could guess what his fate had been.

He had reached the right place, but he had lacked the key. The glow sticks he had used to show the way back had worked against him. The bloody dress girl had noticed them, followed them, and left him with nowhere to run.

And just as I realized that…

Bam.

I heard something knocking on the locked double-doors from the other side.

…*No, wait.*

Hadn’t he died here because he hadn’t had the key? Things might be different inside and outside the door. Even if you needed the

key to get in, you might just need to turn a knob to get out. But if the door had been open and it had been locked from the inside afterwards…

The bloody writing had said “open up”. Not “it won’t open” but “open up”. I sensed a great darkness in that slight difference in nuance.

“Hold on, dammit.”

They might not have had much of a choice. They might have just barely made it inside and they might have been slaughtered if they hadn’t shut the door. But there still would have been another choice. Who was on the other side of that door? A face came to mind and I quickly rejected the possibility. I had been searching so hard for her, but I didn’t want to be reunited with her now. Definitely not here.

I used the tip of my garlic head to dig out the keyring and card embedded in Garlic Suicide Squad #1. *Ow, ow. God that hurts! It’s like ripping off a half-healed scab!! O-oh, #1 isn’t going to be much use anymore.* I crossed the garlic corpse, jumped to doorknob height, and somehow managed to hold the card in front of the reader.

There was supposedly no power here.

But an unnatural buzzer rang and the double-doors automatically opened inward. The corpse lost its support and collapsed inside.

And…

When I looked in…

“…Satori-kun…?”

I saw the worst possible combination waiting for me: the corpse

and the Class Rep.

Part 9

(Garlic Count: 14)

I still didn't know some basic things. Why was I garlic? Who was the bloody dress girl? And what was the Class Rep's real reason for coming to this abandoned hospital?

"Thank goodness it's you, Satori-kun. I don't know what I would've done if it was that vampire…"

"Right."

I had learned a few things in my investigation, but I was missing too many pieces to the puzzle. And most of those were not mysteries concerning the hospital or the vampire. I had finally realized that the missing pieces were about myself and the Class Rep.

"Why are you here, Class Rep?"

"I ran away. Satori-kun, I'm sorry I didn't wait for you. And what about that person? You have a garlic body…so you couldn't have done anything, right?"

"He was leaning up against the door."

"I see… The radiology department must have special walls. I couldn't tell who was out there."

I decided to suspect everything.

Was what she was saying accurate? Had we really come here for a school project? Was I correct in assuming we had been acting as a group and gotten separated from the other members?

“Class Rep.”

“What is it, Satori-kun?”

“Come to think of it, what brought this hospital to your attention?”

“Eh?”

“Y’know, you said it was for school, right?” I made sure not to answer her slight surprise with an extreme reaction. “But surely there was a closer location for putting together a report. Even if this is in the same city, heading deep in the woods where there’s no cell signal is going to a lot of effort, right?”

“Yes…” She paused as if rolling the sound around in her mouth. “It’s true we could have done something about how different local convenience stores will sell different products.”

“Yeah?”

“But doesn’t it make you curious when you find out there’s something you didn’t know about in your own city? I only recently learned there was a hospital deep in the woods here. It might be abandoned, but it’s private land and the government office wouldn’t give me permission to investigate it just for fun. I thought this was a good opportunity. …And I was afraid to sneak into somewhere like this on my own.”

The gist of her argument wasn’t wrong. It seemed to fit her tastes and way of thinking. Besides, she wouldn’t be the Class Rep if she could learn about something odd and just leave it be. Control freaks tended to make sure everything lined up the way they wanted it. If an ingredient turned up in our hotpot and she didn’t know where it came from, she wouldn’t just ignore it. She would ask who had brought it.

“By the way, Class Rep.”

“What is it?”

Garlic didn’t have a mouth, but I mimicked taking a deep breath.

And I said it.

“That doesn’t make any sense. It’s pitch black down here and there isn’t a single glow stick.”

Yes.

I could have understood it if she had been walking around the basement with the man who had laid out the glow sticks. But if she had arrived first, shut the door, and not known that young man had arrived later…then what had she used to walk through the darkness? Even now, she didn’t pull out a flashlight. Nor did she reveal a glow stick or smartphone backlight.

Besides, even if this vampire was a Polish Vampire Princess type and wasn’t instantly killed by sunlight or a stake through the heart, she was still damaged by sunlight. You might be able to get away while she flinched back. In that case, the first step wouldn’t be finding or drawing a chalk circle. Wouldn’t it be opening all the curtains and tearing off pieces of wooden boards? Unlike garlic me, she had free use of her two arms. But she hadn’t done so. She had kept the sunlight out, crawled through the dim light, and kept the environment perfect for the vampire.

And in the end, she had gone to the radiology department where there was no light whatsoever.

I was garlic. I had no eyes or ears. I had been hesitant to enter the dark, but I could tell what as around me even without any light. It was like I had automatic night vision that I couldn’t adjust myself.

But the Class Rep was different. She was nothing more than human. If she could not gather information with her eyes or ears, she should have been stuck…

“Class Rep.”

“What is it, Satori-kun?”

I was afraid.

I didn’t want to ask.

I didn’t want to give any validity to this possibility.

But…

Even so…

“Were you bitten…maybe?”

Part 10

(Garlic Count: 14)

That devilish theory was the worst thing I could think of, but it explained everything.

For example, when we had first hidden below the bed, had the bloody dress girl really not noticed us? Or had she ignored us as one of her own?

For example, had the Class Rep disappeared from the hospital room because she had realized someone was approaching the radiology department where the coffin was hidden?

The only possibility that didn't have to do with vampires was the director collapsed back in the examination room next to the rehabilitation room. Had he been fighting over the valuable coffin with the young man collapsed over there?

Although I didn't know if they were fighting over the location of the coffin or the chalk as the vampire approached.

"Satori-kun."

Even now, the Class Rep was not acting any different from normal.

Even though it was pitch black and radioactive materials could have leaked out of the broken machinery.

"Do you really think that? Do you really think I was bitten by the wandering vampire and I'm already being controlled by her?"

"But that explains everything." I faltered. "I don't want to think it!

But all the puzzle pieces fit together perfectly. Once I thought about it, I couldn't see any other way for them to fit together!! So please deny it. Class Rep, show me your neck and tell me you haven't been bitten!!"

"Calm down, Satori-kun."

The Class Rep seemed to raise her index finger in the darkness.

"Satori-kun, you are mistaken. You may think you've gathered all the pieces, but you haven't. Aren't you ignoring the most fundamental mystery of all?"

"What…? What more could be hidden!?"

The Class Rep moved her raised index finger slightly. And that was enough for my mind to go blank.

Yes.

She pointed at me.

"Satori-kun. Why are you garlic?"

Part 11

(Garlic Count: 14)

It was a basic question.

An absolutely fundamental question.

“Eh…? Ah…?”

“See, you can’t answer it. Didn’t you find it odd, Satori-kun? You’ve turned into a giant garlic that can talk and roll around, but how could I be so sure it was you? Even if I asked 100 questions and the garlic got them all right, I wouldn’t normally think a faceless and bodiless garlic was you. Plus, you can bury yourself and multiply endlessly, so how can I know *which* garlic is you?”

“…Now that you mention it.”

Telling garlics apart had to be more difficult than telling apart stray cats strolling through your neighborhood.

“Human or vampire, I shouldn’t be able to know it’s you just from seeing the garlic. See? There’s a missing piece of the puzzle.”

“…”

“And another thing: who is the bloody dress vampire wandering around the old Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital?”

“U-umm, it’s a system known as the Polish Vampire Princess, and…”

“That isn’t all that important.” She cut me off. “What matters is

why the hospital acquired a coffin and vampire pair. And how acquiring them will earn them money. Satori-kun, have you actually thought this through?”

“U-um, well…”

“Could it be something like human trafficking? But if it was something that illegal, they wouldn’t have to limit themselves to an Archenemy. I don’t like saying it, but it’s a lot less dangerous to abduct and sell a normal human. And there are several people collapsed in this very hospital.”

“B-but they might be able to charge a higher price if it’s a vampire.”

“True. The immortal can be attractive for military, medical, or artistic purposes. But in that case, they would need a certain technique to capture the wandering vampire.”

“Ah.”

“They would need a way to safely secure the vampire without killing her. The indebted director returned to this dangerous hospital as a last-ditch attempt to recover. In that case, he must have known that method. And where did he test that method…and on whom?”

It can’t be…

It just can’t be…

“Are you saying this hospital was a facility used to research ways of defeating Archenemies…and vampires in particular!?”

“Well done. Now is the shape of the puzzle coming together?” The Class Rep winked at me in the darkness as if she could see. “That bloody dress vampire was a dummy for the hospital. They took her in as a theoretical enemy. Either their research stalled or their

sample vampire escaped her cell. Either way, the hospital fell into ruin. The director had to skip town to avoid his debts and the responsibility for loss of life. But even after several years of struggling, that was his area of expertise, so he was forced to repeat the same thing to protect his way of life. He must not have known any other way to earn a living."

"So he came to recover the vampire coffin to begin his research anew…?"

The young man was probably from a rival business. Or maybe a debt collector pursuing the director. There was no way to find out now.

"This hospital had a method for humans to oppose Archenemies." The Class Rep spread her arms. "And we walked deep inside the abandoned hospital without a clue. Then we touched something we shouldn't have. That's what turned you into garlic…and me into this."

"Kh."

Yes, that's right.

What had happened to the Class Rep's body? How could she see in the dark?

My panicked vision picked up on something odd.

There was something sharp sticking out at the edges of her mouth…?

"A dhampir. You could say I'm half-human and half-vampire right now."

…

Erika had once read me a picture book about that when I was little.

“A dhampir isn’t made by a vampire biting a human. They’re the baby born between a vampire and a human. Eh? How are babies made? C-c’mon! We can talk about that later! Later!!”

Yes.

That’s right.

“A dhampir can easily switch between vampire and human, both physically and mentally. If they let their power consume them, they become a vampire. If they control it, they can become a powerful hunter. Then again, which answer is usually considered correct seems a little twisted to vampires like us.”

A dhampir had unstable powers and apparently wouldn’t live long. Something about not actually becoming immortal. If they fought for the human side, they would not be rewarded, but the ones who were willing to burn away their short lives to help others would apparently become hunters.

…It might sound like a lovely story, but I had no intention of harming vampires like Erika, so I just couldn’t understand it. And that didn’t matter now.

“C-Class Rep?”

“What is it?”

“Are you okay? I mean, if you’re a dhampir, then…!”

“Ah ha ha. I’m in much better shape than you, Satori-kun.”

That might be true. If we were talking about a short lifespan, I didn’t even know if garlic was an annual plant or a perennial plant! But the Class Rep was more important. What was going on here!?

“Look, Satori-kun.”

The Class Rep smiled.

And with that slight smile, she pulled out a small hand mirror. She lowered it so my garlic head could see and she adjusted the angle.

“!?”

“Vampires aren’t reflected in mirrors, right?”

I had no idea what to say.

I wasn’t trying to be mean to my vampire older sister or zombie little sister, but this seemed different somehow.

Agreeing to it and letting one bite you was one thing. But the Class Rep and I hadn’t done that. Someone had done this without asking what we wanted.

“Satori-kun, I don’t actually know how stable our bodies are. You saw what happened to the director, didn’t you? Our lives were left in the hands of something with only a theory behind it. It hadn’t actually been completed.”

“Oh…”

Was that why the Class Rep had hidden below the bed instead of relying on the chalk circle? She hadn’t known how the vampire side of herself would react. That was also why she avoided fighting the pure vampire in the bloody dress. No one could guarantee she could wield her power as a dhampir or that she wouldn’t destroy her own body with her power.

In this abandoned hospital, the Class Rep would look like a hunter to the vampire and like a rampaging Archenemy to the humans. She was on neither side, which put her at the most risk. And yet I

had suspected her…

“Sorry, Class Rep.”

“It’s fine. I think it’s a miracle you even managed to stop panicking after finding you’d turned into garlic.”

“Either way, I think we should do something about that vampire if we want to move freely through the hospital to investigate.”

And as we discussed that…

I heard an unpleasant noise. This new sound in the dark room was far too soft to be a living human, but it had a realistic weight not found in imagined sounds.

I didn’t smell that oppressive rosy scent. But what else could create this atmosphere of the dead…?

A young man had been leaning up against the door. He hadn’t been able to get inside the radiology department without a key, so hadn’t he fallen victim to the bloody dress girl’s fangs!?

“Dammit!”

I sent all the other garlics toward the man as he slowly got up. But that wouldn’t solve anything. The most it could do was make him flinch back for a moment. And he was blocking the door to the radiology department. We couldn’t escape with him there!

“Satori-kun, since you got in here, do you have the key!?”

“Yeah. I swiped the keyring and ID card from the director’s briefcase in the examination room! But what about it!?”

“There’s a door in the back labeled Temporary Storeroom for Something-or-Other, but I can’t get in. It’s thick, so we might be

able to hole up in there! If one of the keys fits in the keyhole…”

That wasn’t a fundamental solution. But we did need a sturdy shelter to overcome the current crisis. And if the Polish Vampire Princess’s cursed coffin was hidden back there, we could reach the source of it all. Shutting off the source might bring down the bloody dress girl and the young man vampire she created.

“Whatever the case, let’s get to that storeroom. Class Rep, you handle the key!”

“Right!”

The two of us moved toward the back of the room. As the radiology department, the door had that strict symbol on it as a warning. But that didn’t matter to a garlic like me or a dhampir like the Class Rep. We unlocked the door and ran inside.

The other viewpoints remained in the back of my mind like a daydream, but the visuals from the extra garlics vanished one by one. The garlics sent after the young man had been wiped out.

In addition to dusty equipment related to X-rays, there was a row of plastic containers. They may have been lined with lead panels. It looked best not to open them. Not that I knew what any of it was. And buried by the supplies was a square trapdoor as if for storage space below the floor. The Class Rep grabbed the handle and pulled it up to reveal a steep stairway leading down.

An odd mixture of sweet roses and incense smoke hung in the air. It reminded me a lot of the blood spilling from that bloody dress girl…

My garlic body rolled down the stairs.

It was a small room. There was a vague light, but not from candles. It was probably from glow-in-the-dark paint. And that faint light

revealed the outline of what sat there: a solemn Western-style coffin made of ebony and gold.

This was the source of the curse. This gave the bloody dress girl her power as a vampire. So if we sealed it, we could escape the current threat. From there, we could take our time searching for a way to become human again.

“Class Re-…”

I looked back to share the joy I felt from this hope.

And something crushed my body from above…?

My voice was cut off. My vision and thoughts scattered in every direction. A unique and sharp smell spread around and it took me a moment to realize my garlic head had been crushed underfoot. I could not look back now. I was crushed and unable to move. A wet sound came from the sole of someone’s shoe as they moved their foot off of me. No, they were preparing to stomp on me again. To completely erase the mind inside those poor remains.

But it wasn’t that young man. Nor was it the bloody dress girl. They hadn’t had a chance to get inside that thick door ahead of us.

Which meant…

“I finally got the door open.”

…Class-…

“The coffin was here, but we couldn’t recharge with the door locked.”

Oh, I get it.

There was only the one key. And the hospital director had brought

it in from outside. That meant this door had originally been open. The director I had found in the pediatrics examining room hadn't come here to retrieve the coffin and vampire. He had come here to seal the door and thus cut the bloody dress girl off from the coffin. He had succeeded in that, but he had been killed on his way back out.

The bloody dress girl had wanted to recover her route to the coffin as soon as possible. Otherwise, she couldn't "recharge" and would lose her power as a vampire.

And if the Class Rep was helping the bloody dress girl…

"Were you lying about being a dhampir?"

"…"

"Were you simply bitten and turned into a vampire? And then did you trick me into doing what you wanted, Class Rep…!?"

Come to think of it, her footprints had vanished in the hallway. Whether she had wrapped something around her shoes or clung to the wall or ceiling, why had she needed to hide her tracks?

She responded with the heel of her shoe.

This time, the shock from above splattered me in every direction…

Part 12

(Garlic Count: 7)

The Class Rep's act had been perfect. I would have died there if I had been human and then no one would have learned the truth.

"…Gasp!?"

But I was garlic at the moment. And I hadn't told the Class Rep exactly how many of me there were.

Yes, I had left some extras in an empty hospital room on the third floor.

And…

"…"

The seven garlics rolled toward the stairs.

The Class Rep might think she had won, but she was surprisingly careless. Garlic was a vampire's weakness and rubbing it across the coffin would act as a seal. Even in the world's most famous vampire novel, sacramental bread and garlic had been used to seal the coffin.

And due to the young man's rampage inside the radiology department, there had to be grated garlic all over the place. On top of that, the Class Rep had crushed me underfoot in the vampire's greatest hideout where the coffin was stored. That would have splattered the smell, the flesh, and the juice around the area.

In her attempt to protect the coffin, she had actually tightly sealed

it.

The bloody dress girl could no longer return to the coffin. She could not recharge her power as a vampire. She would run out of power at some point and return to being a normal human.

And then it would be happily ever after.

…Except no, it wouldn't be. It was true that saved the heroine of the Polish Vampire Princess story. But what about the people she had bitten? The story didn't actually mention whether or not they were saved along with her.

So.

So.

So.

"…"

The dark, dark basement was frighteningly silent. My seven garlics rolled along as they followed the glow sticks and I reached the radiology department without any real trouble.

And yet I was approaching the coffin that the vampires should have been protecting with their lives.

When I rolled inside, I found the young man face-down in a pool of garlic juice. He was not moving. He was completely dead. Or was it that he had *returned* to being dead?

Even if it was a vampire weakness, garlic would not have that dramatic an effect. Something else had caused this. By sealing the coffin and returning the original bloody dress girl to human, the power supplied to her underlings was cut off. But unlike the Vampire Princess directly connected to the coffin, that power was

cut off very roughly. So he had not returned to being a living human and had remained a corpse.

I had a bad feeling about this.

I didn't want to continue on.

But for some reason, my garlic army rolled further in. The thick door to the storeroom was not locked. Nor was the trapdoor leading further down. And I couldn't sense anyone there. It was a motionless, abandoned room and I couldn't hear a single noise.

"Class…Rep…?"

The darkness was eerily lit by the glow-in-the-dark paint.

The ebony coffin sat in the center.

There really was no sign of anything alive. Only the inorganic stillness, the faded appearance of an abandoned building, and a still form leaning up against the heavy coffin…

"Class Rep!!!???"

[keep watch] Results [from the ghost cat]

Clear Time: 002:29:05 (as experienced in the story)

Max Hit Count and Damage Count: 47 hits, 2980 damage

Max Garlic Creation Combo: 300 Garlics

Attack Evasion Rate: 10.3%

Area Exploration Rate: 22.5%

Subquest Completion Rate: 7.0%

- Multiplied the garlic.
- Cooking Quest: Became grated.
- Cooking Quest: Became sliced.
- Repelled the Bloody Dress Vampire at least once.
- Survived an encounter with the Bloody Dress Vampire at least once without using a chalk circle.
- Acquired the keys and information from the director’s corpse.
- Found the coffin.
- Realized the Class Rep was the mastermind.

Overall Rating: C

—After the first run, hidden elements will be unlocked. By loading a cleared save file, you can retain your data while playing further runs.

Chapter 2

Part 1

“Waaaaah!?”

I tried to sit up and my forehead hit something heavy.

First of all, where was I?

What had all of that been?

I groped around in the darkness and found I was trapped in something like a long, narrow, and cramped metal box. It felt like being in a thick cleaning supplies locker collapsed on its side. Of course, none of the surfaces would budge no matter how much I pushed or pulled. Nothing opened or even creaked. I was quickly overcome by an invisible pressure from all directions.

…Also, I wasn’t garlic anymore.

I had arms and legs like normal and I had a forehead. I felt all over my own body like some kind of pervert and found I really did have a human body.

That was the normal state of affairs.

But in that case, what had everything before this been? I scratched at my sweat-soaked hair and felt something like hard plastic. It was the dive device used to connect my dreams to the disaster environment simulator and input my senses.

Which meant…

“It was a game? …It really was some cruel space created by Maxwell!? Well, of course it was. I mean, none of it made sense. I

remained calm and kept going even with dead bodies all around, I kept talking to myself like it was an RPG, the Class Rep was a vampire, then a dhampir, and then a vampire again, and no one questioned that I was garlic!!”

Some semblance of reality finally returned to my thoughts. I felt along the side of my hip and pulled out my usual smartphone from my pocket. For some reason, there was a cable connected to a fairly large rapid charger. I couldn’t let anyone know how jealous I had been when I borrowed that one from Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf. I pressed the button and the screen lit up. The ceiling was much closer than I had expected. It felt like being closed inside a steel coffin with the lid welded shut, so the pressure squeezed at my heart all the more.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

A short text SNS speech bubble answered me. Maxwell wasn’t human; he was the administrative agent program for the disaster environment program I had built myself.

The actual machine was in a distant container…so that meant I had a signal here.

“Explain the situation. What’s going on here?”

“Due to a complicated situation, it was necessary for you to remain in a 200L space for three hours. But it was doubtful you could last that long in utter silence, so I sent the command to have your mind moved to virtual reality. Would you like to view the detailed log?”

Three hours.

Was that why I had used the quick charger? The smartphone’s

battery might not have lasted without being plugged in.

“So what was the complicated situation? And…where am I?”

“Warning: In the interests of your mental health, I do not recommend revealing that information.”

“But I’m curious.”

“Sure. Brutal Archenemies are wandering around outside and you are currently hiding from them. By the way, you are in a hospital’s old morgue and you are currently hidden inside Cold Storage Chamber A-05.”

“Gyaaa

“Ugh, dammit… This is no joke…”

“Warning: As you have left before the estimated time, the risk of being captured by the Archenemies has increased. I recommend taking evasive action.”

It was dark outside the chamber as well, but not because it was night. It was thanks to the lack of windows. The battery display was full, so I pulled out the charger cable and pointed the backlit smartphone around to view my surroundings.

It did not seem at all like a clean hospital. The backlight wiped away just enough of the thick darkness to see a bare concrete floor and walls. They had large cracks running through them and stainless steel tables were flipped over and abandoned.

“What is this place…?”

“Sure. This is the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital, an abandoned hospital built in the forest on the border of Kukyou City.”

“…?”

Wasn’t that the same as the virtual reality where I was garlic and the Class Rep had crushed me underfoot?

Something flashed by the wall. I turned the backlight in that direction and saw digital counters on the rows of locker doors. They were probably temperature displays.

But there hadn’t been any power during the garlic simulation.

“Maxwell, does this hospital have power even though it’s abandoned?”

“The investigator hooked up their own diesel generator. All of the

fluorescent lights are out, but that must be why some of the computers and medical equipment have come back to life. However, there is an unpredictable risk of an electrical fire because the state of the internal connections is unknown."

"Investigator…?"

Did that refer to the hospital director or young man from the garlic quest?

"So who are the brutal Archenemies wandering around outside? This isn't another simulation, is it? So is one of them the Polish Vampire Princess?"

I asked several questions all at once, but Maxwell's response was not what I expected.

"No."

"Hm? That isn't it?"

I frowned, but I didn't have time for a leisurely game of twenty questions.

The steel door to the morgue was suddenly kicked open from the outside.

"!?"

I flinched back from the deafening noise and pointed my smartphone in that direction. My heart shrank in fear as I briefly thought of the bloody dress girl, even though I knew she was only from that virtual world.

But who I saw was even more unexpected.

"Huh? Onii-chan?"

“Ayumi!?”

Long black hair was worn in twintails with the ends twisted not into twin croissants but twin butter rolls. The girl in a skintight track outfit was my little step sister. She was also a zombie with stitches all across her body. She was a proper(?) Archenemy. I could never hope to win a sibling quarrel with her.

I went limp with relief upon seeing that familiar face.

“O-oh, Ayumi’s here. I don’t know the details, but is Erika here, too? If so, there’s nothing to worry about. I mean, you two are unbeatable.”

But an odd speech bubble appeared on my smartphone.

“Warning.”

“Ahn?”

Next, a deafening sound burst out as if to crush my heart.

Ayumi herself was swinging her brutal limbs around wildly.

“Wha-?”

“It doesn’t really matter, but just wait there a bit, okay?”

With that casual comment, my little sister bent and twisted her legs, hips, and back while sometimes supporting herself on a leg and sometimes flipping upside down on an arm. She spun around and around like she was breakdancing.

Her fists and feet used that centrifugal force to pierce through the masses of metal rapidly flying in from the hall.

“What are those?”

They were about the size of motocross bikes. The two-wheel vehicles used their large spike-like suspension to bounce off the floor and they had various weapons hanging from the arms that extended to either side like an attack helicopter. The support wings seemed to bend and fold up when making curves or passing through doors, but that wasn't the problem. They had a chain gun that didn't need a magazine, a narrow electric saw, and…was that a gas-operated pile driver aimed at Ayumi!?

Ayumi arched her back into a bridge and just barely dodged the thick spike. From there, her rising right leg continued on up and smashed the mass of steel.

The flow of time returned to normal.

Another three or four of them attacked, so the Ayumi Storm destroyed those Winged Motocross Dangerous Delinquent Babies.

"There. That should do it for now."

"W-wait a second, Ayumi! What are we even fighting against here? Is the Archenemy this time tin dolls or something!?"

"Huh? You don't know, Onii-chan? When fighting against a highly-contagious Archenemy, the standard tactic is to wear protective suits or leave the fighting to bloodless dolls. Although if you're up against a cursed doll, that can actually get your unmanned weapon hijacked."

When fighting against an Archenemy…?

Then had the Winged Moto(etc.) been sent in by a human group similar to the Bright Cross?

"And they're the perfect pawns for Maxwell's side to separate you from us, Onii-chan."

What does…

…that mea-

“Gh!?”

Ayumi circled behind me while my mind went blank. She passed an arm around my neck and squeezed with the inside of her elbow!

At the same time, at least five more of the motorcycle drones clattered in through the broken metal door. It was an explosive situation. And the motorcycles must have had gyros installed because they skillfully came to a stop and glared at us!

“Hey, Maxwell, hey! If you want to protect your adorable master, call off your troops!! You know Onii-chan’s a zombie the instant I bite him, right!?”

Ayumi shouted that warning and she seemed to be focused on the smartphone screen she could see past my shoulder. She was waiting for a response. And neither Ayumi nor Maxwell seemed to be joking today!

“No. I cannot hand my user over to you monster sisters at the moment.”

“Gbweh. Ayu-…xwell…what is going-…?”

“Do you know what facility this is, Onii-chan?”

…

“A secret hospital that turns humans into garlic?”

“Close but not quite.”

She gave a serious answer to my desperate joke.

“It’s a department store for anti-Archenemy technology. That said, most Archenemies can be handled by priests and exorcists. That includes abominable snowmen, werewolves, zombies, and skeletons. But there is one exceptional field that has so many variations that it has a specialized class of hunters. Now, which Archenemy is that?”

“Vam…pires.”

“Yes. That’s why Onee-chan is so on edge. She insists we must get rid of this entire dark legacy before someone else can get at it. She’s probably still on a rampage up above.”

“What about…you, Ayumi?”

A place filled with technology for fighting Archenemies could not be a fun place for her. Even if it was not directly targeting her, increasing the technology for defeating another type of undead was still an indirect threat. Just like boiling metal in wine would bring it closer to being a room-temperature superconductor, you never knew what would lead to a breakthrough.

But my little sister readily replied while pressing her body up against my back.

“Me? I don’t really care. In fact, once you become immortal, your life tends to be lacking in hurdles toward improvement or the stimuli needed to grow. So it would be kind of nice if I did have a natural enemy. It’s like a game. You don’t want to just be unilaterally defeated, but setting things up so you can compete isn’t all bad.”

…But Erika was different.

My instincts told me a strange sisterly fight had broken out in this abandoned hospital.

And…

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“So what are these things, anyway? I don’t remember giving you these dangerous toys.”

“Sure. I rewrote the system permissions for the unmanned weapons stored in this facility. Their development codename seems to have been Horse Knight.”

“…And why are you fighting with Ayumi and Erika using those new toys of yours?”

“Sure. Because you commanded me to.”

What?

I had ordered Maxwell to attack Ayumi and Erika? And I had climbed inside a morgue chamber and escaped into a virtual world in the meantime?

Why? What for!?

I had trouble believing Maxwell’s answer, but then he provided some essence of credibility.

“Your Class Rep had turned into a hunter Dhampir, so you needed to fight your sisters in order to retrieve her from the Archenemies.”

Again.

This overturned everything again.

What had happened here!?

“The initial conditions are mostly the same as inside the virtual world. This is a department store for anti-Archenemy technology, so it can turn a human into garlic with a mind of its own and it can turn a living human into a half-human, half-vampire. That is, a Dhampir.”

“Biting isn’t the only thing that can turn you into a vampire,” said Ayumi. “There are cases where someone was cursed to become a vampire because they committed a religious or burial taboo. In the Class Rep’s case, an item that curses you just by touching it was modified to adjust the density of the curse. And that was of course to artificially mass-produce high-quality hunters.”

“W-wait. Does that mean the Class Rep is…?”

“Sure. After taking a step into the realm of the Archenemy, she was captured by the immortals who feared being hunted by her. Simply put, she is in grave danger.”

“No, not by the immortal*s*. By *Onee-chan*. Fuguu. Don’t treat me like the bad guy, too. I’m here to save the Class Rep and Onii-chan.”

“No. Once faced with your sister, you are sure to give in to your emotions. It is best to eliminate any dangerous and uncertain elements.”

“Shut up, you malfunctioning maid. Surely you don’t think a scrap heap like you can settle things with Onee-chan. Biting people to increase her numbers isn’t the only thing a vampire can do.”

“…”

“…”

C’mon, enough of this heavy silence. And I didn’t realize how the Class Rep was so popular.

“Maxwell, I rescind my command. We’re working with Ayumi now.”

“But…”

“Please. And, Ayumi.”

“Heh heh hehhh. What is it, Onii-chan?”

“…While I appreciate the unlimited service-time with those soft things pressing against my back, is this the anniversary of something?”

“…!!!???”

I came clean and yet I was nearly strangled by her slender arm.

Part 2

“Uuh…”

We moved from the dark hospital basement to the first floor. The stairway up from there was filled with trash, so we exited to the hall just in time for my cute little sister to groan like a stray dog with an empty stomach.

“What is it, Ayumi? Is it raw meat time for zombies?”

“No! Fuguu!! Oh, god. It’s so hot and stuffy. And when my deodorant spray is out of gas!!”

“Eh? Will you be okay? You’ll start rotting on the inside if you get lax with your preservative treatments, right?”

“It isn’t that serious, but…uuh, fuguu.”

“I believe Miss Ayumi is worried about the odor of her sweat.”

“Ah!! M-M-M-Maxwell, why did you have to say that!? You have no tact at all!”

“Additionally, it seems that Miss Ayumi’s self-consciousness about her odor is connected to her holding you from behind earlier. A human would not secrete sexual attraction pheromones so blatantly, but Miss Ayumi has not sufficiently studied such fields, so based on superstitious beliefs-…”

“Fuguu!! Fuguuuuu!! I-I-I-I-I’ll smash you to pieces, you piece-of-junk simulator!!!!!!”

“Stop it, Ayumi. Destroying my smartphone won’t do anything to

Maxwell in his container. And more importantly, here."

"Fugu?"

"They're wet wipes. Want to use them?"

"Fuguu." For some reason, she pouted her lips as she accepted the disposable package. "Fine, but don't look this way."

"Why? How much of yourself are you planning to wipe down?"

"Don't imagine it! And that wasn't what I meant! A-a girl doesn't want to be seen taking care of herself like this. It's not the same as being seen naked or in your underwear, but get a clue! Fuguu!"

"Miss Ayumi is saying she does not want to be seen raising her arm and using the wet wipe on her armpi-…"

"Ahh, ahh, ahhhhh!! Maxwell, you're doing this on purpose, aren't you!?"

"…Since when did you two get to be such good friends?"

This was never going to end otherwise, so I turned my back on Ayumi in the hall.

After a while, I heard some hesitant rustling of clothing.

"Ayumi."

"What? Don't you dare suddenly look back!"

"I won't. But are you sure you're okay?"

Even the immortal had limits. What we called "exhaustion" was more than just lactic acid building up in our muscles. I had a feeling the Bright Cross's Colosseum had been a way of wearing

Archenemies down like this instead of battling them head-on.

But without knowing what I was thinking about, Ayumi sent a mischievous-sounding voice toward my back.

“You say that, but is there anything you could even do if I did say I couldn’t keep going?”

“Don’t act like I’m completely useless. You’re light, so I could carry you on my back.”

“Bfff!?”

“?”

“N-no, it’s nothing. It’s nothing!”

For some reason, Ayumi started sounding strange.

We made our way to another staircase since the one was blocked by trash.

“This is nothing particularly unusual,” said Maxwell. “Statistically, my user has lately increased the frequency at which he suggests he carry Miss Ayumi on his back or princess carry Miss Erika.”

“We didn’t need to know that, Maxwell! And what was that about Onee-chan? I don’t like the sound of that! Fuguu!!”

“Wait, don’t cling to me after telling me not to turn around!”

Meanwhile, Ayumi and I walked down the dark hallway.

I decided to gather my thoughts on the current situation.

This was the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital, an abandoned hospital built in the forest on the border of Kukyou City,

and it was apparently actually what remained of a facility for the development of anti-Archenemy technology. Any possible connection to the recently-destroyed Bright Cross was unknown. But if that older sister of mine felt a serious threat here, whatever was hidden here would be the real deal.

For some reason, the Class Rep and I had come to the abandoned hospital and she had touched something. That had hit her with an artificially-modified curse and turned her into a Dhampir, a half-human and half-vampire.

Currently, the Class Rep had fallen into Erika's hands and Ayumi and Maxwell were tripping each other up while trying to retrieve the Class Rep. That was what had apparently set up this complicated isosceles triangle of a battle.

Or so I thought.

However…

"Oh, my, my. You two are so mean, using my absence to fill Satori-kun's muddled mind with falsehoods…"

It happened on the moonlit rooftop.

There were almost no humans to turn into zombies or vampires here, so Maxwell reigned supreme with so many deadly motocross machines at his disposal. Even if he could not fight and win, he could easily determine her location. Erika could not escape Maxwell's eyes, so we successfully ran reached her on the rooftop.

That girl with long blonde hair in gorgeous ringlet curls was wearing a gothic lolita dress and she put on a bewitching smile.

"Satori-kun, do you really think I would harm Class Rep-chan?"

"Well…"

“A pure human would be one thing, but she’s a Dhampir right now. That makes her a half-vampire. She’s pretty much one of my own, so why would I need to be so cruel to her?”

…*Now that you mention it…*

I was a human, Maxwell was a program, Ayumi was a zombie, and Erika was a vampire.

If the Class Rep really had become a Dhampir, a human like me and a vampire like Erika would be the most similar to her.

And you didn’t know which way a Dhampir would develop. She might join the human side and become a hunter, but she might succumb to the blood curse and join the vampires.

“It wasn’t me that spilt up you and Class Rep-chan. Now, who was it that couldn’t trust her as a half-vampire and took immediate action assuming she would bite Satori-kun? My, my. Wasn’t it Ayumi-chan and Maxwell?”

Kh…

“No, Onii-chan, don’t let her trick you! She’s the one that captured the Class Rep!!”

“No, questioning it is good,” said Maxwell. “Compare what they have said and done and you should be able to conclude which one is correct.”

Which was it?

Ayumi, Maxwell, or Erika? Which one was trying to harm the Class Rep!?

I chose…

Part 3

There was something I had to check on before I rushed to a decision.

“…Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“I have a fundamental question: Why are my memories so muddled?”

“…”

Yes.

It was true I couldn’t spend three hours inside a morgue’s cold storage chamber trembling in fear of death. I would want to distract myself, even if that meant a fictional world. I understood that all too well.

But simply using virtual reality would not muddy my memories that much.

Since it had happened, there had to be some other reason for it. And it was not knowing the initial conditions that left me unsure who was on my side. Plus, Maxwell would know the most about my muddled memories.

After all…

“That wasn’t my first time through that virtual reality, was it? I had to have been repeating it over short periods of time like consecutive machinegun blasts. And if that information was

overwritten about ten thousand times, it might be able to make a mess of my short-term memory."

That was a technique only possible with the artificially-designed experience points of a virtual reality. It could be used to confuse my sense of time and physical experiences.

I may have only been released because a margin of error – or a sense that something was "off" – had grown with each run-through and it had passed the acceptable level. Or perhaps I had been released because my short-term memories had been successfully erased.

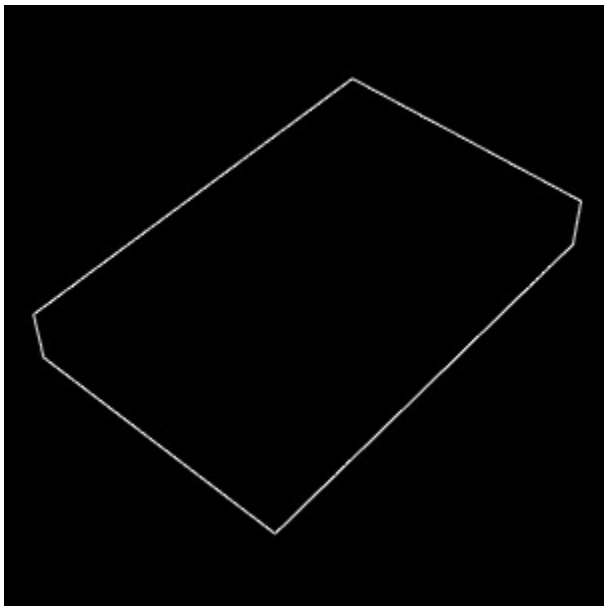
Either way…

"Maxwell."

If he had intentionally robbed me of my short-term memories to drive a wedge between me and my sisters…

"No, who are you?"

Smartphone: Pearphone 8 Omega



Maxwell: My user's mobile device. The carrier uses a cheap SIM. I am not actually located on the smartphone, so I am merely connected to it from my container via high-speed wireless communications.

It is an outdated model, but it was actually discontinued because the specs were too high to continue selling at a profit and the later model had its specs lowered. OS updates are no longer provided by the official site, but my user is forcibly downloading files for the later model and keeping it updated like that. That shows just how much he cares for it.

[keep watch] Message Written on the Horse Knight Chip [from the ghost cat]

Even if I can get as much funding as I want, this specification document still seems so strange. It is based on a motocross bike used for off-road racing and it is equipped with a gyro system for absolute vertical stability. And it of course has to withstand the recoil of the gas-operated pile driver, chain gun, and howitzer hanging from the support wings. Even while standing, driving, or using its suspension to bounce up stairs.

They are linked to the Ghost that administrates the facility and they act as its arms and legs. Steel hunters that will not become vampires when bitten, hm? I see. It's a decent justification…but am I really *only* developing equipment for use against Archenemies? I really don't want to find out these were sent into a warzone and used to take more human than Archenemy lives. And I really don't want to be forced to work at gunpoint by the very machines I created. That's just like the brazen bull that was first used on the very man who created it.

Chapter 3

Part 1

As soon as I made that announcement, the unmanned weapons that looked like motocross bikes with attack helicopter wings began to move. My vampire older sister and zombie little sister stood on either side of me to face them.

“Ayuuumi-chan?”

“Uuh… S-sorry, okay? Fuguu. But you really were keeping his Class Rep to yourself, Onee-chan! And you turned her into a Dhampir!!”

“Only because a completed anti-Archenemy theory is what the Ghost wants more than anything and it wasn’t clear where Satori-kun had gone. Why wouldn’t I want a bargaining chip in case my cute little brother was taken hostage?”

Wait. What? Huh?

“I’m really confused, but what is the Ghost!?”

“As you can see, it’s the system agent in charge of this abandoned hospital. Even after everyone left, it continued searching for a completed theory, just as it was programmed to. It would be a tear-jerker in an SF story, but it’s only a nuisance in real life.”

“Then what was that about you two bringing in a diesel generator to power the place?”

“Have you found any reason at all to trust what it’s telling you?”

“Wh-what about the Class Rep becoming a Dhampir!?”

“That part’s true. A high-quality artificial hunter is exactly what the

Ghost would want, so it wouldn't want to let that get away, right? But at the same time, this is no more than a coincidental success. It would probably want to chop her up and thoroughly investigate this success to find a way to mass-produce them."

Kh…

I felt dizzy. Was I really in reality here? I felt like I was wandering through endless game worlds set up like opposing mirrors.

Meanwhile, my smartphone did not receive even a word from Maxwell…no, from the Ghost pretending to be him. Was that because I had revealed its identity or because the act was no longer necessary now that its hostage (me) had reached my sisters.

A storm of destruction swept across the roof.

On one hand, the Horse Knight unmanned motorcycle weapons used their machineguns and gas-operated pile drivers to push back the highly-infectious Archenemies.

On the other hand, the vampire and zombie stars could spread their infection across continents if they tried.

As the steel vanguards approached from every direction, the Archenemies stood back-to-back with me at the center and they danced. They danced with a crazed beauty. Each time their shoulders and hips turned or their arms or legs twisted, the precise industrial products built to military standards were split, crushed, or smashed.

…Had my sisters always been this strong?

Strong enough to overwhelm the enemy while also protecting a frail human like me from the many machineguns surrounding us?

"…"

At that point, I brought a hand to my forehead.

Don’t let it overwhelm you. Trust them. Don’t reject reality just because it doesn’t seem to fit your assumptions. This isn’t a virtual reality.

I crouched down and operated my smartphone while my sisters fought. But I wasn’t just swiping with my index finger like normal. I opened a system developer mode and checked the background information.

…Where had Maxwell been replaced?

It was obvious once I checked. Maxwell was a handmade system filling up a container in Kukyou City, but all I had was a commercial smartphone. Someone had intercepted the signal from the container to the smartphone and overpowered it with a signal of their own.

It was like crossed signals on a TV or radio. They hadn’t actually broken into the system and given Maxwell a virus.

I set up a random change to the frequency band and for the time being used pi for the random pattern. If Maxwell was using every single frequency to break through, I was sure to catch his sample signal.

“Maxwell! What’s my fetish!?”

“Sure. A dancing swimsuit forehead glasses childhood friend classmate class rep. You pervert.”

Good. It seemed I had connected to the usual Maxwell. The abandoned hospital’s Ghost would be working to drown him out again, but it was too late. While it was scanning for the band being used, we would be continually jumping to the next candidate band

out of a hundred or even two hundred options. The Ghost could never interfere unless it could predict the random pattern we were using.

“Use encryption sync Dr09. Cut off all other signals.”

“Sure.”

Even if there was some crossed signals, this would help distinguish between them to an extent. But most of the commercial apps wouldn’t work in this handmade mode, so the increased security had its downside. Even the SNS I was using only barely worked.

“Maxwell, my recent memories are a mess thanks to the abandoned hospital’s Ghost continually overwriting my short-term memories. I need your support. Does it look like you can win a cyber-battle?”

“If you mean taking control of the entire system, then no. But if you mean a less permanent solution, then yes.”

“What exactly do you mean?”

“Sure. Based on what I can see through the smartphone camera, Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi are going a little nuts trying to show off to you, but I could interfere with the signal controlling the unmanned weapons and cause them to stop moving.”

“Do it.”

The result was as dramatic as sticking a thick wire along a fish’s backbone. The deadly motocross bikes gave an unnatural jerk, lost their balance, and collapsed one after another.

“Huh?”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow… Onii-chan, did you do something?”

My sisters brushed back their hair or let their hands dangle down as they viewed Maxwell's shockingly perfect handiwork.

The current threat was gone.

I felt like I had greatly simplified the information and situation.

In other words…

"So we have to fight the abandoned hospital's system over the Dhampir-ized Class Rep, huh?"

Part 2

We had to explore the eerie abandoned hospital, rescue the captured Class Rep, and remove the curse placed on that princess.

It felt like the plot of a video game. Was that because the mastermind who had set it up was a program?

“Erika, where is the Class Rep?”

I had found a secret room in the virtual reality, but that had been for hiding the Polish Vampire Princess’s cursed coffin.

And since the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital’s Ghost had plenty of those Automatic Hyahah! Bikes (as I feel like calling them), there was most likely a much larger hidden area.

“On the top floor.”

“Hm? That’s a pretty conspicuous location…”

“Oh, is it really? Satori-kun, do you know how many floors this convalescent hospital has?”

Huh?

Now that you mention it…

“Isn’t it four or five floors?”

“But no one knows exactly. No one really cares even if the elevator never stops there. They’re satisfied just speculating that it’s the director’s office or VIP rooms, so the hospital can easily set up another world so close by but so far away.”

“…”

We had been guided there by the Ghost, so we had not made any detours on the way to the rooftop. We hadn’t paid any attention to the top floor and we wouldn’t have thought it odd if it had been closed off by a fire door.

We all left the roof and descended a floor to the abandoned hospital’s top floor. My sisters could see in the dark, so only I was reliant on my smartphone’s backlight. They got to work on the fire door blocked by a pile of trash. There was apparently a trick to the spring holding the door in place, so Erika reached up and messed with the gearbox that had an arm attached to the top of the metal door. Then I heard the small metallic click of something unlocking. …The structure of the lock and the material of the door were different from a normal fire door, so this had apparently not been installed in case of a fire.

I shined my smartphone’s light inside and found an awfully clean hall.

There was no avoiding the normal deterioration that came with time, but that was all. There was no trash lying around and there was no dust. Almost like someone had been cleaning it over and over like a machine.

There was something like a blue will-o’-the-wisp at my feet.

I quickly aimed my smartphone down and saw what looked like a thicker frisbee crawling along the floor like a bug.

“Onee-chan, are there cleaning robots in here?”

“Seems that way. Although there are a lot that died after failing to reach the charging boxes.”

It reminded me of a mall coldly playing its welcoming announcements even after the destruction of the human race.

“Hm? Didn’t the hospital only have power because someone from outside – in other words, one of you two – brought in a small generator?”

“Are you still believing anything the Ghost said after all the lies it told you, Onii-chan?”

“You lied to him too, Ayumi-chan. But to get back on topic, the hospital seems to have a few power generation systems: things like solar, hydro, and wind power. Those facilities exist here and there where the forest has been unnaturally cleared. I couldn’t track down exactly how many there are, though.”

I wanted to ask what those were for, but the answer was obvious enough when I thought about it.

…To keep it off any official records. Even if you made a few secret rooms or underground chambers, you couldn’t hide them if the water and power usage were recorded. There was no hiding that data when reliant on the city government and facilities, but the only alternative was to set up some self-defense against the data.

“But this feels a lot different from the Bright Cross. They were a lot more blatant in what they did.”

Erika and Ayumi must not have liked to hear me mention the Bright Cross because they both sighed.

“Fuguu. Well, that’s obvious enough from the fact that this place isn’t connected to the underground tunnels and that it’s way out in the forest leaving it barely even inside Kukyou City. My guess is it was a frontline data-collection base for a rival company of the Bright Cross.”

“It means the anti-Archenemy industry isn’t a monolith. That said, it feels like the Bright Cross had the upper hand when it came to actual and effective methods of killing Archenemies. This place seems more like it was reliant on a weird mixture of technology and talismans.”

Yes.

Even if all the people were gone, this was an anti-Archenemy research institution. And yet my sisters were calmly walking through it. The unmanned deadly motocross weapons may have been a step in the right direction since machines weren’t infected when bitten, but they were no use in actual combat. The flesh-and-blood Bright Cross combat members they had fought in virtual reality had been stronger. At the very least, both Erika and Ayumi had been hit by them.

…We might just be fine here.

Unlike those dark tunnels, I didn’t sense that sticky darkness that threatened to drown you if you peered too deeply into it. Unlike the Colosseum, I couldn’t spot that human ugliness that swallowed up common sense and encouraged crazed passion and excitement while watching immortals fight to the death.

I had a vampire and zombie who had been too much for *the* Bright Cross. If this convalescent hospital was on a smaller scale than the Bright Cross, it was possible the Ghost would be entirely helpless. In fact, it might have been that helplessness in a direct battle that had led it to confuse things by impersonating Maxwell.

“Oh, right, right.” Erika clapped her hands together in front of her large chest and sounded like she had just remembered something. “As I said, I think Class Rep-chan is on this floor, but, um, be careful, okay?”

“?”

At first, I had no idea what she meant.

But…

“Class Rep-chan is on a bit of a rampage right now. Enough so that she can probably break free and escape even with her arms and legs chained to the bed.”

A loud sound of destruction came from the side. I shined my smartphone’s light that way in surprise and saw something charging my way. It was a red mass with an oppressively powerful rosy smell and wearing a bloody dress. *No, no, wait! This is…!?*

“Class Rep!!”

Part 3

It was surprisingly hard to tell when every last centimeter of the thing was soaked red. Something seemed off compared to what I had seen in the virtual reality, but then it hit me: the skirt was a lot shorter. And that led to the realization that what looked like a red dress was actually a girl's school uniform. And that led to further realizations: her hair wasn't silver and she was wearing glasses.

And as the forehead glasses Class Rep from next door charged at me with enough force to not just bite me with her fangs but tear the flesh and bone from my throat, my sisters took an extremely simple action.

They kicked her.

They moved simultaneously as if kicking down a door.

The tremendously deep noise was a lot like the beat of a drum larger than I was tall. The Class Rep's small body doubled over as she flew backwards. She rolled backwards and even destroyed a counter sectioned off by a transparent acrylic panel, making it look more like something from a dangerous country's bank than a nurse station.

"C-Class Reeeep!?"

I shouted without thinking, but there was no human response. Also, her skirt fluttered up as she flew, revealing her panties quite spectacularly, but she showed no sign of caring. …*Hmm, but what color were they? They were soaked with red, but I doubt that was the original color. This feels like scoring a goal in soccer but having the ref say it didn't count. I can see her panties, but it just isn't the*

same…

But this told me something.

In the virtual reality, the Class Rep and the bloody dress girl had been separate people. Since the Ghost that ran the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital had repeatedly overwritten my short-term memory with false information, it must have wanted to hide this fact. That way, it could keep the Dhampir Class Rep as the fruits of its research and dissect her to find a way to mass-produce her.

“Oh, my, my. Was the abandoned hospital’s incomplete data not enough to make a proper hunter?”

“E-Erika, can the Class Rep, um, return to normal? How do we make her human again!?”

“Class Rep-chan was born a 100% pure human. The only reason she’s being treated like a half-vampire is because of an artificially-altered curse. That means we only need to shut off the source of that curse.”

“Oh,” I almost said

Wasn’t this something Erika herself had told me about?

“The Polish Vampire Princess… Is the cursed coffin the source!?”

That virtual reality had been partially used to repeatedly overwrite my memories and trick me into thinking the Dhampir Class Rep and the bloody dress vampire were different people. The convalescent hospital’s Ghost must have decided that cutting and pasting pieces of the existing material would confuse me a lot more than just inputting more and more nonsense data.

…The virtual reality had included a photo of a specimen girl among

the director's possessions, but was that someone who had touched the coffin before today or had it been entirely fictional data? I had no way of investigating that now.

Red darkness squirmed beyond the thick but broken acrylic panel and behind the disordered counter. There was no time. The Class Rep was about to get back up.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what do we do, Erika? We have to save her! Even if we know about the coffin, we have to keep her from moving! I can see her panties and every last bit of them is soaked red!"

"Satori-kun? It sounds to me like a few different desires are mixing together there."

"Fuguu. And why are you only relying on Onee-chan!? I'm here, too…"

"Tremble, tremble. But it's the Class Rep's panties! And, Ayumi, are you good at anything other than eating and sleeping? A wa, a wa wa!"

"That's not an answer."

"That's not an answer."

Our conversation was cut off by a thick sound much like a musty futon being struck with a stick. The glasses forehead Class Rep had leaped over the counter like a wild animal crossing a hurdle and she was charging at us head-first!

My sisters exchanged a glance and Ayumi grabbed my hand and fell back. Meanwhile, Erika took a step forward.

The Class Rep and Erika clashed head-on.

It was hard to believe the sound it produced could come from

blood or flesh colliding and it even shook the walls.

The Class Rep approached in a straight line like an animal, but Erika moved around in a circle. Her gothic lolita skirt and gorgeous blonde ringlet curls spread out around her like a large flower as she faced the Class Rep like a matador.

To be honest, I couldn't at all follow what was going on even from so close.

Maxwell used the smartphone data to calculate out what happened while those rapid blows and deafening noises occurred right in front of me, so he provided that information after the fact. It was like listening to a local reporter with a bad connection describe a foreign sports broadcast. If I had tried to fight, I probably would have had my face or torso pierced several times over before I could even move.

…Had I really returned to reality? Was this really not another virtual reality???

I adjusted my grip on the hairband-like dive device.

"M-M-Maxwell. I'm only a burden here and I can't bear much more if this. Please just let me pass the time in the Class Rep Swimsuit Dance Paradise…"

"Hey! Scrawny Onii-chan!! Don't you dare run away now!! I'm confiscating that!!"

"Stop! You don't know your own strength and the dive device is sensitive and expensive! Let go! Give it back!!"

"Fuguu!"

"Ah!?"

While my little sister and I got in a fight on an entirely different level from Erika and the Class Rep, the crucial high-tech hairband slipped from stupid Ayumi's hand and flew through the air.

Erika's slender hand grabbed the spinning device.

She then faced the Class Rep who was charging toward her like a wild animal.

"Special Attack!! Double Hairband!!"

It fit perfectly on the Class Rep's head. This was the heretical act of placing a hairband on a girl who was already wearing one. It bothered me as much as having a glasses girl wearing an extra pair of sunglasses on her forehead. And when I glanced at my smartphone, I saw the text indicating the simulation had begun.

With her mind dragged into virtual reality, the Class Rep collapsed to the floor.

She was entirely motionless.

Not an arm, a leg, or even a finger moved.

"…Did we just discover the ultimate restraint for Archenemies?"

"Hmm. It wouldn't work against any that don't have brains or that attack on a subconscious level, so you can't let your guard down."

"And, Onii-chan, this means the Class Rep is in that simulation eternally watching herself dance around in a swimsuit, doesn't it? Will she be okay? I just hope it doesn't trigger some kind of Gestaltzerfall."

That was a shock.

"M-M-Mwaxwell-shan!?"

“No. To preserve the privacy of those participating in my simulations, I cannot tell you what is happening inside. …But when I supplied the curled-up Class Rep with an NPC based on your physical data, the situation took a turn that I would have difficulty describing…”

“Wahhhhhhhn!?”

Screaming wasn’t going to solve anything. The only way to switch to a different simulation set was to log the Class Rep out and wait for it to be set up again, but that would release the wild Class Rep once more. Unfortunately, she was going to have to face herself (dancing in a swimsuit) for a while longer.

“Hey, Erika. The Class Rep was turned into a Dhampir by weakening the curse of the Polish Vampire Princess’s coffin, right?”

“What about it, Perverted Satori-kun?”

“I’m getting attacked here too!? B-but anyway, have you checked in the basement? In the radiology department’s…um, temporary storeroom for something-or-other, there just might be a steep staircase leading further underground.”

“Hm.” Erika placed a hand on her slender chin. “But wouldn’t you have a hard time getting there, Satori-kun? An abandoned hospital’s radiology department seems like it would contain some preeeetty dangerous chemical substances.”

“Uuh!?”

I suddenly realized that I had been a giant garlic in the virtual reality that the abandoned hospital’s Ghost had shown me. I wasn’t that way anymore and I didn’t have a protective suit. …And even if I found one on a hanger here, I couldn’t exactly trust it.

“And, Onii-chan, we checked around and there are a lot of thick locked doors that we couldn’t destroy. And the basement floor was the biggest example. We couldn’t open most of the doors down there.”

…I see. Even if I know where the door is, I don’t have the key now.

“Um, was the director collapsed in the pediatric department or rehabilitation room? It would be great if he had his half-opened briefcase with a key ring and ID card inside.”

I hesitantly asked my question, but Erika and Ayumi only exchanged a glance and shrugged. It seemed real life did not match the virtual reality to that extent.

“Anyway, it does sound like the basement floor is most suspect since we haven’t searched very much of it.”

“Fuguu. So we have to do it by force in the end? But unlike Onee-chan, I can’t regenerate my body. We’ll have to pick up ‘something like a crowbar’.”

…Apparently Archenemies did not consider the option of “search for the key”. Of course, we were in the middle of a dangerous area, so we couldn’t just decide to “put it off until we found the key” or “try something else since we didn’t know the code”.

“You wait here, Onii-chan. The dive device restraining the Class Rep’s mind is connected to your smartphone via Redtooth, right? If you leave, the connection will be broken and she’ll wake up.”

“W-wait, Ayumi. But…”

“Don’t worry, Satori-kun. I’d really rather not bring up that time of our lives, but we were the fierce fighters who survived the fearsome Bright Cross’s Colosseum. Searching around a bit will be

easy for us.”

“Um, what about the key?”

“Think about it rationally: If this is using the cursed coffin, the Class Rep has to return there periodically to recharge her power.”

“That means it would be over already if it was locked up tight, keeping Class Rep-chan out. But that hasn’t happened. There must be an open path to the coffin; we just haven’t found it yet.”

With that, I smiled at them and they left.

Would they be fine? Of course they would be. In fact, if a full-power zombie and vampire weren’t enough to handle whatever it was, a human like me wouldn’t stand a chance. I would only be a burden for them.

Sometimes the difference in power was too great to make up for with ingenuity. Even if you had polished your swords and spears, pored over the map, and carefully come up with a plan for a 100-against-100 battle, you would still be helpless if it was 100 man-eating tigers that approached your 100 warriors. That was what it meant to face an Archenemy in a serious battle.

“That aside, the Class Rep sure is cute while she’s asleep. And knowing that nothing I do will wake her up right now feels so immoral. Maybe I should wipe off all this mystery blood soaking her body. Eh heh heh.”

…

…

…

I held my head in my hands next to the sleeping Class Rep.

Erika and Ayumi said they would be back right away, but they shtill haven't come byack.

"Dammit…"

Was it not that simple? If there was some cruel trap in the real radiology department, they might have been caught while investigating it based on the virtual reality information.

But.

What if it wasn't a trap?

There weren't many other things that could do serious damage to a vampire or zombie. Normal troops probably couldn't do it and even a group of those killer motocross bikes wouldn't be able to take them out.

I glanced toward the window which was covered by a thick curtain. It was night. Late at night. No matter how much the lights of civilization covered the planet, that was still a dangerous time that brought you closer to death.

An eye for an eye.

A snake best knows how to catch a snake.

…I didn't want to consider it, but could there be another unknown Archenemy lurking here?

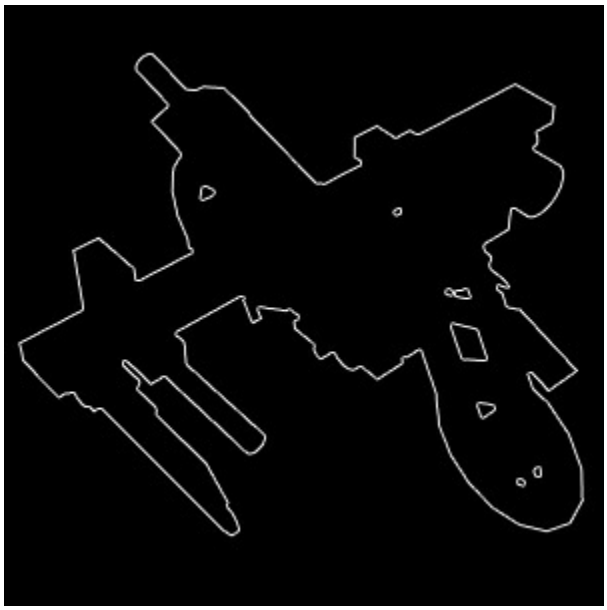
Either way, I couldn't just ignore my sisters' long absence. I also wanted Maxwell's backup, but if my smartphone moved away from the headband-style dive device on the Class Rep's head, her mind would be freed from its virtual reality cage.

Which meant…

“I’ll just have to carry the Class Rep with me. And if I rub against her along the way, it’s not my fault!!”

“User, why is it you seem unable to stop smiling?”

Killer Motocross Bike: Horse Knight

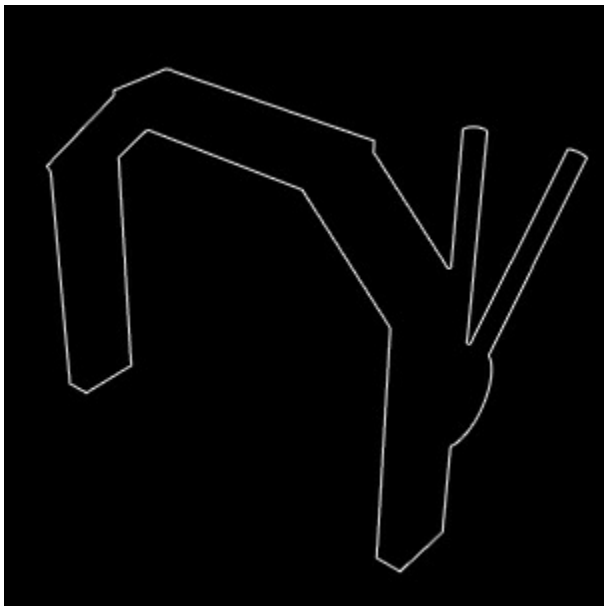


Maxwell: What appears to be a commercial light off-road motorcycle was equipped with a variety of communication and electronic control equipment. The gyros attached to the front wheel keep it balanced and the adjustable wings attached to the seat have various weapons installed to make it an anti-Archenemy unmanned weapon. The levers, pedals, and gauges for a manned motorcycle all remain, but that may be just for fun.

A focus on quantity over quality shows this weapon likely came from the concept of letting one's industrial strength do the talking. Its actual suppression ability is not actually all that great, but it is the perfect weapon when looking at the personnel loss ratio.

When making curves, the wings can fold upwards to allow the actual motorcycle to skim just off the ground. That and the jumps it makes using its suspension make it surprisingly nimble, so watch out for surprise attacks.

Dive Device: Dream Case



Maxwell: A commercial VR device with discretionary pricing, but its average market value is just under 30,000 yen. The processing space that the human brain uses for dreaming is utilized to show the user a vision in reality. Thus, playing late at night is strictly forbidden.

It is a receiver that uses short-range wireless communications and the processing is done by a mobile device or game system, so the dive device itself has a very simple design. That may be to keep the device light enough to reduce muscle exhaustion while wearing on the head. …But then why is the price so high?

Depending on how it is used, it can be switched on to forcibly “knock out” an opponent, so it has excellent specs as anti-Archenemy “handcuffs”.

[keep watch] Impressions from a Guard on the Back of a Visitation Record [from the ghost cat]

It was never a normal facility, but there have recently been even more strange guests that usual. No, I should call them creepy.

There was a general contractor with eyes like a hitman who was carrying a bunch of cement and there were those young women with their faces entirely hidden by robes. They looked like fortunetellers, but they weren't. They're called "worshipers" and they're hired to do jobs in the underworld. I'd really rather not look them in the eye.

The other guards even claim the researchers who collapse from exhaustion are buried behind the walls underground. Given the sharp-eyed contractor with cement and the strange worshipers, it certainly sounds plausible, but I don't think it's that simple.

Calling it a "seal" would be more accurate. I mean, they aren't going to be placing normal corpses behind the walls. After all, this is an anti-Archenemy research facility. No one here would be surprised to have a corpse get up and walk around, so I can only think they've opened the gates to hell or something.

…Come to think of it, I haven't seen *her* in a while.

She showed up partway through and received such a warm welcome, but…no, it couldn't be.

Chapter 4

Part 1

I couldn't trust anything in the abandoned hospital. Even if there was protective clothing in a locker, I could never trust that it was durable and airtight.

That said, the radiology department awaited me on the basement floor. If the equipment had broken down and just been left like that, who knows what it would be scattering around. Going there without any kind of preparation would be reckless.

"This should do for now."

"An X-ray screen?" asked Maxwell.

Using the light of my smartphone, I checked through the medical office's shelves, found a screen that reacted to X-rays by emitting visible light, and pulled it out.

"I'm pretty sure analog camera film also reacts to X-rays. If things really are dangerous in the basement, this X-ray screen will light up on its own. This will let me judge the safety as I continue on."

The situation was different from the virtual reality, so I wouldn't have the guidance of the glow sticks on the floor and I wouldn't have the night-vision ability of the garlic body. No external light could reach the basement floor, so I only had my smartphone's backlight to rely on.

The Class Rep was surprisingly light and soaked with the rose blood as I carried her over a shoulder bandit-style. Then I made my way to the stairs down to the basement floor where Erika and Ayumi had vanished.

…And if my sisters hadn't come back, then that basement floor sounded suspicious as hell. What was I going to find there?

I spotted a hammer on the way and stuck it into my pants belt along with the X-ray screen, but how useful would that actually be? One arm was occupied by the limp Class Rep and the other was occupied by the smartphone I was using as a flashlight, so I had no way of using the weapon anyway. Besides, if those two sisters working together couldn't defeat whoever or whatever it was, I doubted a hammer would be much use. It was mostly just a good-luck charm to make me feel better.

Just to be sure, I stopped by the third-floor pediatric department and rehabilitation room.

I aimed my smartphone backlight inside, but there was no one there. Not too surprising, that. Just because it was a creepy abandoned building didn't mean it would have corpses lying around.

"But that means I don't have the key. Maxwell."

"Sure."

"The radiology department entrance uses an IC card. That means it's an electronic lock. Can you force it open?"

"The virtual reality supplied by the enemy is not the most reliable source of information and I will have difficulty saying anything with certainty until we see it, but given my considerable skill, it would be worth trying."

"Okay."

The door to the all-important storeroom used an analog lock, but we would open everything we could. Not only did I want to reach

the coffin, but I was worried about Erika and Ayumi.

I started down the stairs with the soaked Class Rep over my shoulder. *Hmm, if a patrolling cop saw me like this, it could easily devolve into a firefight. No, I might take it a step further and make my urban legend debut.*

The place was as covered in trash in actual reality as in the virtual reality, so the stairs were blocked partway down. I moved back into the hallway and used the opposite stairs to continue down. I had originally come from the basement morgue, so I knew the way.

There was no sign of anyone on the way.

Not Erika and Ayumi and not some strange Archenemy.

…What had happened to them? I had seen how violent those sisters could get in the simulator. They truly had enough power to destroy a city or country if they made a wrong move. It was hard to believe that both of them could be taken out.

“…”

I arrived at the deep dark opening of the stairs to the basement. It was somehow different from the darkness of the night. It was denser or stickier or something. It literally felt like gazing into the maw of a giant beast. Instead of avoiding danger as I continued, it was like I had to leap down the monster’s gullet to find any answers at all.

Not only was night the time for Archenemies, but the depth of this darkness was not normal. This had to be a labyrinth or demon cave where an Archenemy could fully wield their fangs and claws as an Archenemy.

“What will you do?” inquired Maxwell.

“Keep going, obviously.”

I couldn’t bring the Class Rep back to the city as a Dhampir. If this was caused by the Polish Vampire Princess, obstructing her path back to the coffin would turn the princess into a human once more, but the story had the knight sit on the coffin lid to get in the way. That meant it might not count as obstruction unless I discovered the coffin’s location and directly contacted it.

Besides, if I just left with the Class Rep, I wouldn’t know what had happened to my sisters. I couldn’t just leave them here.

I took a deep breath.

And I took the first step down the stairs into the darkness.

Part 2

The route was the opposite of before, but this change was not an improvement. There really weren't any glow sticks on the floor at even intervals. That meant the young man had not been here, he had not died in front of the radiology department's door, and he would not get back up as a vampire.

My smartphone's backlight was all I had to rely on.

The basement was even dustier and damper than the aboveground floors. The air was more stagnant than in the virtual reality and it smelled somewhat mildewy.

"…? What is this?"

Plus, the smell was mixed with a rusty odor. I aimed the backlight toward the wall and saw something written with dark red paint. The writing was crammed in tight. It looked like the alphabet, but it wasn't English. However, it seemed to have some kind of system to it, so it wasn't just random.

The darkness likely played a role, but I hadn't noticed it while heading up from the basement with Ayumi. Your feelings could really change your field of view.

"That is Latin, but there is no grammatical structure. It is no more than isolated words."

"Latin? As in Latin music?"

"If you are referring to the cultures of Central and South America, then no. Think of it as an old European language that formed the

basis of English.”

There were also drawings of some kind.

A square was drawn inside a large red circle. The points of contact between the circle and the square’s corners were filled with even more illegible writing.

“Fire, water, wind, and earth. There are also the occasional terms that correspond to heat and cold. I detect traces of someone from before the discovery of atoms and elementary particles trying to use what knowledge they did have to express the structure of all things. Although the result is as mistaken as the heliocentric theory versus the geocentric theory.”

I didn’t understand the details, but the creepiness of the drawings allowed me to imagine what this probably was.

“So is it something like a magic circle…?”

Whether or not it actually had any effect, someone must have believed in them to thoroughly cover the wall of this long, long hallway. That was enough to send a chill down my spine.

This was a different sort of fear from the Bright Cross’s Colosseum which had thoroughly calculated everything out using statistics. There should have had no basis to it, but I felt the rails shifting out of place as if it was judging all of the lives here. Kind of like the Salem Witch Trials. Whoever had written this, I doubted we would understand each other enough to even talk about the weather.

…But had this been in the virtual reality? I might not have noticed it with only the faint light of the glow sticks to go on.

“Maxwell. This rusty smell…is it some kind of blood?”

“I cannot say without an external accessory to analyze the chemical

makeup, such as a centrifuge or particle observer. However, this is a hospital. It would depend on when this was written, but if the hospital was still running, they could have used transfusion blood."

"…I thought as much."

The smell seemed awfully strong for something that might have happened years ago, but it didn't feel like it had been written using blood taken from a living person who was here now. There was just too much of it. The blood writing and magic circles covered the entire wall of this basement floor, so a full bathtub of blood wouldn't be enough. Even if the Bright Cross had controlled Kukyou City until recently, I doubted they could gather more than 200L of fresh blood all at once. Investigating the accidents, suicides, hospital deaths, and missing people over the years would probably make my balls shrivel up, but this was still just too much. They could never cover it all up.

"This might not be a rusty smell. It might be actual rust."

"Something like an experiment to make calligraphy ink out of rusted nails?" asked Maxwell.

…I had indeed seen that mentioned on a summer project recommendation site.

Living sacrifices were not so easily acquired in this day and age. That meant they would have to use something else instead. Just like some cultures started burning dolls instead of people or used soybeans or pomegranate as a replacement for the flavor of meat. Making ink from rusty nails and mixing it with a bit of human blood was still insane, but it didn't require mass murder.

"Or is it pig or chicken blood? The symbolic meaning would probably be different than with human blood, but I have no idea what this occult ritual was meant to accomplish. I can't exactly

judge the right or wrong answer here.”

Either way, it wasn’t exactly pleasant to look at. It felt like being thrown in a cage at the zoo in a foreign country and having everyone pointing and laughing at me. I didn’t know what exactly it meant, but I could tell there was definite malicious intent.

…The wall didn’t explain where my sisters were or how to return the Class Rep to normal. I didn’t need to put myself in a worse mood by going along with some lunatic’s nonsense.

I removed the backlight from the wall and adjusted the Class Rep’s position on my shoulder. Strangely, carrying her didn’t feel like a burden since she was a cute girl. It would have been hell if it were a 50kg bag of cement instead. It was possible a mysterious Class Rep effect had numbed the exhaustion with endorphins and dopamine.

“…Now, then.”

I glanced down at the X-ray sheet, but there was no reaction yet. My cells were apparently not being roasted by invisible radiation. I could continue my investigation.

This hospital was made by connecting two T-shaped buildings so they formed a square with the lines sticking out, and the basement seemed to follow the same pattern. I continued on to the radiology department, but I noticed something after turning a corner.

“?”

The blood writing(?) covered one of the walls, but not both. It only covered one side.

Yes.

“What is this? Is it only covering the inner wall?”

The abandoned hospital formed a crooked square and the basement did so as well. And it turned out only the walls on the inside of that square were covered in this blood writing or magic circles.

Almost like they were closing something into the underground space below the courtyard.

It kind of reminded me of covering the bare wall in talismans before adding new wallpaper to hide the human-shaped stain on a wall in a cheap apartment known for being haunted.

“Maxwell…”

“Sure. Whether it has any actual effect or not, it would seem someone here believed in this power and took action accordingly. That raises the question of what that person thought they were sealing away with this graffiti on the wall. Or to put it another way, perhaps there is a space beyond these inner walls that is not on the blueprints and perhaps something slumbers within.”

However, that did not mean we could get in from here. The entrance might be a different set of stairs or an elevator accessible from the surface. And if whoever it was had truly prioritized forming a “seal” without thinking of the consequences, the door might have long ago been filled in with concrete. They might have drawn the blood writing and magic circles on top of that.

Whatever the case, they must have been really afraid of whatever was inside that square. Enough so that they had to go this far to rest easy.

Who had done it? And to whom?

The crucial subject and object were missing, but those walls were plenty creepy without that information. This immense amount of

blood writing was not a sign of an eccentric. It was a sign of someone's fear. Fear could lead to bizarre actions such as chopping up a corpse and burying pieces in different places because you feared having the supposedly dead person come back to life. A more close-to-home example would be checking the lock or gas several times before leaving home.

And at the same time, I realized something.

"The Class Rep's coffin probably isn't here."

As my sisters and I had discussed, if it was the Polish Vampire Princess affecting the Class Rep, then she would lose her vampiric traits if she could not periodically return to the coffin to sleep. Just like the cleaning robots on the top floor, she needed to recharge. So it would be pointless to place her coffin in a thoroughly sealed place she could not get in or out of. She could not maintain her current state unless she could return there herself.

The convalescent hospital's Ghost wanted to track down the valuable sample that happened to turn the Class Rep into a Dhampir and it would want to find a way of mass-producing that method even if that meant dissecting her, so it would not want to ruin that balance until it could figure out how this worked. No idiot would pull out a hair drier while investigating a snow crystal under a microscope. I doubted the Ghost would use its unmanned weapons to seal away the coffin.

"Maxwell, map out the place, at least as far as you can see while I walk around."

"Sure. If possible, could you point out some landmarks?"

Either because thick shielding was more easily built in the basement floor or because people would not see the things down here much, it contained a lot of creepy facilities: the autopsy room,

the morgue I had been inside, the medical waste disposal room, the backup power room, the boiler room, etc. I checked each doorplate, opened the door, and shined the backlight inside, but I didn't find Erika or Ayumi collapsed inside any of them.

"Odd… They're all unlocked."

"Yes, and yet Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi mentioned finding almost all the doors locked during their exploration."

"…"

What did this discrepancy mean?

- Someone went around unlocking the doors after my sisters disappeared.
- My sisters went around unlocking the doors during their exploration before they disappeared.
- My sisters had lied and the doors were unlocked from the beginning.

There were a few different possibilities, but all of them provided a glimpse of something more sinister. Possibility #2 seemed to be the most peaceful option, but that would mean some third party had not liked that my sisters were opening the doors and "eliminated" those Archenemy sisters while they worked.

An unpleasant shudder ran down my spine. Even as a hypothetical, that was not something I wanted to think about.

As I walked around the basement floor, I arrived at the radiology department. I had not run across anyone on the way here. Not Erika or Ayumi and not some dangerous third party.

Had they all gone back upstairs?

If not, this deepest area was the most suspect.

“…Maxwell.”

“No. There is nothing for me to do. The electronic lock has already been opened.”

Here too?

I gulped and pressed my palm against the metal door. I leaned my weight against it and opened it.

Part 3

The radiology department.

I held my breath as I entered and, instead of the room itself, I first looked to the X-ray sheet held between my pants and my stomach. Luckily, there was no reaction. Apparently nothing dangerous was leaking out.

I checked around with my smartphone's backlight and saw a rusted examination table in the center of the room. A donut-shaped piece of scanning equipment waited at the head to surround it like a tunnel. I didn't know much about these things, but I doubted it was for X-rays. I guessed it was a CT scan. That was the thing that had its impact stolen by the seemingly superior MRI. They were completely different, but I imagined it as something like the relationship between ICs and LSI or records and Blu-rays.

I had no business in this room.

I checked behind the equipment just in case, but neither my sisters nor a young man's corpse were there.

"…Are they in the storeroom at the back?"

"No. You have no basis for thinking that."

Well, it was true that had been simulation data created by the abandoned hospital's Ghost. It might not have all been accurate.

"If it was setting a trap for my sisters, that whatever storeroom would be the most suspicious place. By making it look like the goal, the Ghost could set up whatever traps it wanted."

As brazenly as I said that, I had only realized it after Erika and Ayumi failed to return. So really, I was no more than an utter moron who had sent his family off to their deaths.

“Warning: If we are assuming this is a trap that Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi could not escape, wouldn’t it be dangerous for you to follow?”

“Of course. But I’m curious about one thing.” I slowly spoke as I gathered my own thoughts. “The convalescent hospital’s Ghost pretended to be you to approach me, right? It used that to confuse the situation by having me repeat the same virtual scenario over and over with slight differences from reality. That muddled my memories. But why?”

“There is too little data to do anything but guess, but I would assume that Ghost concluded that was the best course of action. The Ghost is the system management agent remaining in the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital, so it would have had an easier time deceiving someone who is highly dependent on a mobile device. And your actions manipulated Miss Erika, Miss Ayumi, and myself. You saw through it eventually, but I think it achieved some results.”

“That’s true.”

Looking at it rationally, this was all my mistake. This was no time to be calmly nodding my head, but I couldn’t make any progress without owning up to my mistake.

“But if it could adopt your character so perfectly, couldn’t it have sent messages directly to Erika and Ayumi’s phones? If it sent a fake SOS message pretending to be me and I said I had been trapped in the radiology department, I bet they would’ve fallen for the trap.”

“You have a point.”

“That meant it wanted to control me first and foremost, even if that meant ignoring Erika and Ayumi. And it must have had a reason worth trapping me in that morgue locker for about three hours.”

“Such as?”

Needless to say, I was only human, so I would lose in a serious sibling brawl with a zombie or vampire. I could never win. Not even arming myself with everything I could think of would be enough. If an amateur was handed a speargun and shoved into an aquarium pool containing a man-eating shark and a killer whale, did they stand any chance of winning? The answer was obvious.

But…

“What if the trap up ahead only works on Archenemies? I don’t know if it would be an exorcising seal or a holy light, but what if it’s focused on Archenemies and doesn’t affect a normal human at all? Wouldn’t that give the Ghost a reason to separate an amateur like me from them?”

That would greatly increase my value. If my sisters had been captured by holy water or a charm on the forehead, it was possible they could regain their freedom if I tore it from them.

“Those killer motocross bikes were armed with obvious weapons like machineguns and gas-operated pile-drivers, so it’s possible they weren’t meant for my sisters; they might have been meant for me since I’m immune to anything as silly-sounding as holy power. If so, then it means a lot that I managed to reconnect to you, Maxwell. The occult weapons don’t work on me and you can hold back the unmanned physical weapons. That leaves the Ghost with no options left. …Other than taking my sisters hostage and insisting I obediently surrender.”

“So you want to use every trick in the book to retrieve them as soon as possible?”

“The Ghost hasn’t used them as hostages yet, but I think that’s because it can’t imagine our relationship. There are exceptions like Itou Helen and Kuroyama Hinoki, but it’s extremely rare for humans and Archenemies to live together. The Ghost is an agent specialized in anti-Archenemy technology research, so it would probably have trouble thinking of humans and the undead getting along.”

But that would not last forever. As it gathered data, it would gain more material with which to arrive at the correct conclusion. For example, it could check my captured sisters’ phones and analyze the call records and saved photos. Or it could intercept the cell signal and access the external storage or home server.

So I had to act before then.

Once the Ghost took action, it was checkmate. But if I settled things before my opponent learned how to move the pieces…

“Maxwell, let’s end this.”

“Sure.”

I approached the door to the adjacent storeroom. I turned the knob and found it was indeed unlocked.

Had it been unlocked for the Class Rep? Had my sisters unlocked it? Or had it been some entirely unrelated third party?

I couldn’t sit around wondering. This was a race against time. I used my experiences from the virtual reality to shine the backlight on the floor and open the hidden trapdoor much like one for underfloor storage.

I found a far-too-steep stairway. It was nearly a ladder and I walked

down, step by step.

“Maxwell, prepare for a cyber attack. I want to avoid being shot by those deadly motocross bikes the instant I step inside.”

“Sure.”

All I had to do was defend against the ordinary bullets and special steel spikes. Something like anti-zombie incense was not a problem for me.

With that in mind, I stepped from the bottommost step to the floor.

And immediately afterwards, *that* happened.

Part 4

———A stairway led down.

I had to get to the bottom of the stairs. Erika and Ayumi awaited me deep underground, so I couldn't stand still. I had to hurry. Hurry as much as possible. I had to find and retrieve them before the Ghost caught on.

———A stairway led down.

I felt a slight vibration in my cheek.

Without thinking, I came to a stop and stopped breathing. The roar of an engine came from directly behind me at the entrance we had just come through. It was lighter than a car and more like a chainsaw or lawnmower.

Or a light motorcycle, such as a scooter or motocross bike?

———A stairway led down.

"M-Maxwell!"

I was surrounded by the sound and the unpleasant odor of exhaust faintly reached my nose. But I would be fine if my opponent was the deadly motocross bikes. Maxwell could neutralize them with a cyber attack.

With that in mind, I adjusted the Class Rep on my shoulder and checked my smartphone. This is what I saw:

"Warning: Be caref…this is———coustic effe…"

“What, Maxwell!? I can’t see! The screen’s dark!”

Or was that not it?

Was the screen’s light fine and it was my vision having problems?

———A stairway led down.

My sense of balance wavered. I tried to resist, but it was no use. I fell down the solid stairs along with the Class Rep. I couldn’t brace for impact, but I couldn’t feel the pain either.

Where was the Class Rep? I couldn’t see the smartphone’s light either.

In fact, I wasn’t sure where my arms and legs were or how I needed to move them to get up.

A corner of my muddled morning provided some kind of warning.

…Had the engine noises and exhaust smell really been real?

I had to question it now. They might have been real and they might not have.

Even undead Archenemies could feel tired and exhausted. The feeling of exhaustion was more than just the lactic acid building up in the muscles, so even plant and bone Archenemies would feel it.

And I had seen some movie or drama that talked about extreme lethargy setting in over an extremely short period of time in situations like this.

It was known as combat fatigue.

In a fortress or air-raid shelter where you were exposed to bombs and shells around the clock, the excitement of battle and fear of

death would get mixed together and exhaustion would apparently set in at a pace dozens of times greater than normal.

What if the Ghost had systemized that combat fatigue and turned it into a weapon?

And with enough accuracy to reliably neutralize an Archenemy who would not die no matter how much you cut or shot them.

———A stairway led down.

I couldn’t tell front from back, left from right, up from down, or ahead from behind. My mind ground to a halt, like I was asphyxiated. My breathing and pulse were a complete mess and strange thoughts linked with strange preferences, like I was experiencing a sleep deprivation high. Even so, I had to keep moving toward somewhere using only the sensation of my fingernails on the floor. Because of my sisters. Because of the Class Rep. If I stopped moving, it meant I was giving up and, if I gave up, it didn’t mean my life, it meant the lives of people I cared for, like Amatsu Erika, Amatsu Ayumi, and the Class Rep, who were a vampire, a zombie, a Dhampir, and a classmate, and Ayumi may have gone to a private middle school, but she was a surprisingly good singer and unmatched at karaoke, so when she competed with Erika over the points, she would puff out her cheeks and cheeks are so soft so they can protect the head where the brain and sensory organs are concentrated, but there was also a desire for freedom of movement and that was less about the ability to chew food and more about the human communication methods of speaking and forming expressions, but the Face on Mars and the Moai statues on Easter Island lack that softness, so some people speculate the builders had excellent construction technology and aesthetics, but used a completely different communication system than the human race, such as telepathy which doesn’t rely on facial expressions or vocalizations, and those people speculate it was an independent civilization built by the Third Universe Herilenardans

of-

Part 5

…?

Where was I crawling around?

It was an empty darkness.

All I could tell was that I was lying face-down somewhere.

I realized the Class Rep's weight was gone from my shoulder. I must have dropped my smartphone because there was no light of any kind. The cool sensation of the floor was the only thing I could rely on and it felt terribly comfortable. Removing my body from it felt almost sinful. It was like meaninglessly pushing away your mother and rejecting that warmth.

My mind felt muddy, like all the wiring connecting my brain cells had been filled with caramel and allowed to harden.

I knew something wasn't right, but I couldn't change the situation. Was this what it felt like to try to earn back your starting money after you began losing while gambling?

While still lying on the chilly floor, I pressed my ear against it. It could almost hear something, but I wasn't quite sure it wasn't my imagination. There may have been something deep below the floor or I might have been hearing my own breathing and heartbeat. I couldn't tell at this point.

Come to think of it, after gathering actual testimony concerning doppelgangers of people, didn't it turn out they were statues that looked nothing like them or just strange noises?

I felt like I had gone three days without eating, drinking, or sleeping and, once my exhausted mind had reached some understanding, the cold floor whispered to me with a bewitching female voice. It was awfully cheeky for a hallucination.

“Checkmate.”

“…Who are you?”

“You can call me the Ghost.”

oh. well, if it was a ghost, then that explained it. after all, it wouldn’t have a body, so I wouldn’t be able to see it and it could easily be in the floor.

“This is as far as you get. You could not defeat Operation Card Magic.”

“Is that your trump card against Archenemies?”

“It is.”

“But a holy light of love and courage shouldn’t affect me.”

“This is something more practical.”

the floor seemed to giggle.

“Hey. Think of the most basic card trick: Please draw any card you like from this deck. Make sure not to let me see it. Now, this is your card, the ace of hearts, isn’t it? …So what trick do you think I used?”

“You hid all 53 cards, joker included, around the studio set. After the participant announces what card they drew, you can smile, say you had an inkling, and pull the identical card out of its hiding place.”

“That is one possibility. But couldn’t I just make sure every card in the deck is the ace of hearts?” she was sounding more and more like the class rep.

“Making the cards identical on both sides, including two aces of hearts, and other physical tricks are considered to be the work of amateurs by some, but they are the most surefire methods. And unlike a magic show in a TV studio, you don’t have to give the other person a chance to check for tricks in reality.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“I thought it was amusing.

the class rEp had a very nON claSs rep-like sMIle in her VoIce.

“Hey. You were free to follow your benevolence and destroy the Bright Cross, but did you never think about what would happen afterwards? Sure, the malice of the Colosseum stood out. But that wasn’t the Bright Cross’s goal. They wanted to take the unrestrained Archenemies and give them a reason to compromise and fit in with human society. …In a way, their goal was a lawful order supported by a death penalty system.”

“…”

“You thought the death penalty was too cruel and you tore down the entire legal system supported by it. What is left after that?”

“Why do you sound so proud of all this?”

“I am a rival company. Or rather, a unique Galapagos culture intentionally created to avoid being absorbed by the Bright Cross. I would be most displeased if you took us too lightly.”

THE cLass reP’s wOrdS were PIercinG mE desPITe tHe SMiLE on HER FaCe.

“You could call us a backup plan in case the death penalty was not enough to control the Archenemies. As you can tell from the fact that we were not the top candidate, we are more extraordinary and less practical. And of course we are… An absolute guidance society that guides the entire human race and all Archenemies away from committing crimes in the first place is far more ridiculous than a world created in fear of the death penalty.”

“But…”

“Yes, the death penalty system lost. To prevent this blue planet from becoming a lawless land, we must switch over to a new system and let it cover the globe, no matter how much of a leap in logic this seems.”

“And that system is an absolute guidance society?”

“Humans use something similar, don’t they? I was monitoring the excitement over the Colosseum when it went public. Just by swapping out some information and creating a new target, you disgraceful people readily accepted those cruel public murders as a form of show business. That’s the truth of good and evil. An age of war is not madness. The madness lies in how a simple change in phrasing can create an age of war. We simply wanted to expand that to include Archenemies. Although it is unknown if that would produce as powerful a psychological restraint as a death penalty system.”

“…A world like that isn’t peaceful.”

“History is already on the move. It branched off from the moment you destroyed that world of perfect law. Only two possibilities remain: either an absolute guidance society will manage everything, or it will fail and all nations and cities will collapse into ruin. Which would you prefer, Mr. Turning Point?”

th CLsS rP CnTNd T Spk LKe sH ws trYNg T prVk m

“Hey, Ghost.”

“Yes?”

“You seem to think you’ve already won and the world is yours.”

“I don’t just think it. I have won. I was forgotten in the shadows, but I can now appear on the main stage because you destroyed the Bright Cross.”

“Then…”

……
……

“Why are you bothering to explain all of this to me?”

“Ah?”

“It’s true I fell for your trick. Erika and Ayumi probably didn’t do any better. But there was no reason for you to helpfully give me all the answers. You said it yourself: physical tricks are for amateurs, but that doesn’t matter since reality doesn’t give anyone a chance to check for tricks. So once I was defenseless, you could have just finished me off like flicking off a power switch.”

“…”

“Why didn’t you do that? Was it that you couldn’t? The answer is simple, isn’t it? You only directly interfered with us the one time. You pretended to be Maxwell and messed with me, the one with the smartphone. But that wasn’t because you were narrowing down your targets by drawing a line between a human like me and Archenemies like my sisters.”

“Wait…no…you can’t mean…!?”

“You wanted to get rid of Maxwell. You wanted to get rid of the disaster environment simulator, the only one of us with mechanical eyes and a mechanical brain that would be unaffected by your strategy that targets living beings! From there, it’s simple. You gave us the answer yourself! Maxwell’s cyber attack messed with your head!!”

“…Just kidding.”

“?”

“Maxwell was indeed a high-level threat and an enemy warranting caution, but why wouldn’t I have a countermeasure for a kind of enemy I had expected from the beginning?”

Oh, I get it.

She was saying all the pieces had been in place for checkmate even back when I was having my adventure trapped in the simulator.

But.

“What if Maxwell wasn’t the only computer?”

“What…?”

“You said it yourself: you were monitoring the excitement over the public Colosseum. So are you familiar with the Bright Cross’s computer that was managing all of that?”

She probably didn’t.

The fated fourth round had been against Karen the Valkyrie. That had not been made public even with the Bright Cross’s collapse. That mad bunny girl and I had settled it quietly behind the scenes.

But this was the end.

There had been a computer the Ghost wasn't aware of on the game board. That alone was devastating.

"Her name was Laplace. But maybe there's no point in telling you since you seem a lot dumber than her."

I felt as if something had snapped inside my head. I still didn't know what it was that had trapped me, but I had managed to shake free of that fatigue-inducing illusion. I lifted my face from the cold and dusty floor at the bottom of the stairs.

The unnatural engine noises and exhaust odor were gone. I still didn't know if there had been real bikes there or if speakers and electric bug-repellant incense had been used as a decoy.

"Kh…"

Ow, ow, ow, ow. Regardless, my body was screaming in protest. I hoped the Class Rep was fine after falling with me.

"Welcome back, user."

"Yeah, I'm back, maid-chan. So how's Laplace?"

"Laplace was increasing my calculation specs by being slaved to me. Laplace insisted that I should act as the master which interfaced with you."

"Sounds like my other maid is really shy. Not that it matters since she saved me."

I heard a gasp, but the mechanical Ghost could not do that. It came from Erika and Ayumi who had also been overwhelmed by sudden exhaustion, fallen down the stairs, and ended up in a rather *yuri*-esque pile. They were trembling after being freed from the

intentional combat fatigue attack brought on by the engine noises and exhaust smell.

“…O-Onii-chan has finally started to enjoy anthropomorphizing the inorganic Maxwell and Laplace.”

“You’ve gotten even worse, Satori-kun…”

Now I knew I was in reality. Not even the most detailed virtual reality would be able to reproduce this melancholy draft of an atmosphere.

And this was no time to be crying.

“Maxwell, how much of the Ghost’s system have you taken over!?”

“Sure. I control 73%, excluding the backup space. I can blow the entire thing away at any time. Just give me your authorization.”

“Wait, Maxwell. The Ghost herself is only completing the task given to her. Physically destroy the system files supporting that combat fatigue and the absolute guidance society. And take control of the deadly motocross bikes too. Take away everything she can use to directly interfere! That way she can’t cause any more trouble!”

“…You are too soft.”

“Say whatever you want. Just do it.”

But then intense static came from my smartphone. The voice it produced was a lot like the Class Rep-ish one from before.

“Ksshh! …Ksh, wait!! Are you sure you want to do that? You have already rejected the death penalty system, so if you now reject the absolute guidance society as well, you will lose any psychological deterrent to hold back the Archenemies. Just as there are good humans and bad humans, there will always be good Archenemies

and bad Archenemies. Just as humans not bound by law rush to wicked deeds as if possessed, unmanaged Archenemies will soak their hands with blood as they draw out entirely unnecessary desires!”

“…”

“You have not saved the Archenemies. Even if you have saved the lives in front of you, you cannot stop the many more sacrifices that will occur out of reach! In fact, you have caused them to occur!! Are you really, truly fine with that!?”

She may have had a point.

Humans and Archenemies were the same, so you shouldn’t be mean to them. …If I was using that argument to protect vampires and zombies from the Bright Cross and the Ghost, then I would also have to accept the same negatives as humans.

Sadly, there would be crimes and accidents.

If humans were harshly punished and Archenemies were never punished, there would be no stopping them. That was the point of punishing them with the Colosseum or taking preventative measures with the absolute guidance society.

Simply shooting down every argument was not good enough.

I couldn’t convince anyone unless I had a definite vision of what to put in place after the destruction.

It was like the difference between a train derailing or switching to a different track. Even if you were bored sick of the train’s monotonous shaking every day and you wished it could go somewhere else, you wouldn’t want to be caught in a major accident.

“…Then I’ll create one.”

“?”

“I’m already living with Erika and Ayumi. There’s no problem there! So there has to be something! The answer is right there next to me; I just need to give it a name and a form!! It won’t be a society where everyone fears the death penalty and it won’t be a society where you think like you’re making all your decisions but even the color of your underwear was decided for you! It will be something kinder, more just, and more normal!! There has to be a way for humans and the undead to get along!!”

“Wha-!?”

“Do it, Maxwell. I regret destroying the Bright Cross without thinking it through, but I’ve still decided to keep moving forward. I won’t stop even if it means blowing away that absolute guidance society! So do it!! Clean this planet of that method where someone sits in their throne and looks arrogantly down on everyone else!!”

Maxwell gave a brief response to my command.

Yes, as if it were entirely normal.

“Sure. Understood, user.”

Part 6

The abandoned hospital's Ghost had lost the claws and fangs she needed to fight.

"Maxwell, confirm the location of the hardware. I would feel bad if she was stuck using the unreliable generators in this dusty place. You never know when a short will cause an electrical fire, so I'll take her with me later on."

"First the Bright Cross's Laplace and now this abandoned hospital's Ghost? User, you appear to be well on your way to building a harem of management programs. Even if it runs counter to my own identity, I must ask: doesn't this feel rather empty to you?"

"First of all, I'm shocked to find you see yourself as a girl. This isn't the same as how old tanks were seen as male or female. Do the idiosyncrasies of the programs and scripts create a division between male processing and female processing…?"

"By the way, I prefer shoujo manga to shounen manga. And I prefer Monday night dramas to Saturday night variety shows."

"…So your thoughts really are more feminine?"

With that, I regrouped with Erika and Ayumi. We all looked to the object in the center of the underground room.

A solemn Western coffin was made of ebony, thoroughly polished with varnish, and adorned with intricate gold decorations.

This was the source of it all. It was the origin of the curse that had remade the Class Rep and it was the abandoned hospital's greatest

treasure because it could lead to mass-producing the accidental Dhampir transformation.

This also fit into the category of vampires, but Erika did not hold back. She grabbed a few metal pipes from the floor and tossed one to Ayumi and then me. This would require both hands, so I held my smartphone in my mouth before grabbing the thick metal pipe.

We surrounded the coffin like we were preparing for the *Kagami Biraki* after winning a baseball championship.

“On the count of three, okay?”

“Are you sure, Erika? In fact, this coffin isn’t going to say it has a mind of its own, like a Tsukumogami, is it? It is supposed to be the source of the curse.”

“If it had that kind of intelligence, wouldn’t it avoid cursing just anyone?”

She had a point.

I was convinced for now, and…

“Come to think of it…”

“What is it, Onii-chan? Don’t you want to save the Class Rep? Don’t tell me you’ve taken a liking to carrying a limp girl around.”

“No, it isn’t that.”

The defenseless Class Rep was certainly nice, but I preferred a healthy one with plenty of energy in her smile.

“You had said the basement doors were locked, so you couldn’t investigate the area, right? So what happened with that? They were all unlocked when I arrived.”

“Huh…?”

“…Um, did we say that???”

They didn’t…remember?

“User, I recommend you hurry up and perform the *Kagami Biraki* on the coffin. …There was a time when Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi were under the Ghost’s control due to the high-level control of their fatigue, but we still do not know when that began. They might have been affected quite early on and simply accepted information that was convenient for the Ghost.”

“So Erika and Ayumi didn’t know anything?”

That removed some of my lingering unease, but it didn’t sit well with me. Or rather, it created a new question.

“…Then who went around unlocking the basement doors?”

It wasn’t the convalescent hospital’s Ghost.

The management program couldn’t open analog locks and it would be difficult to get those killer motocross bikes to stick a key in the keyhole and turn it.

It of course hadn’t been the Class Rep or me.

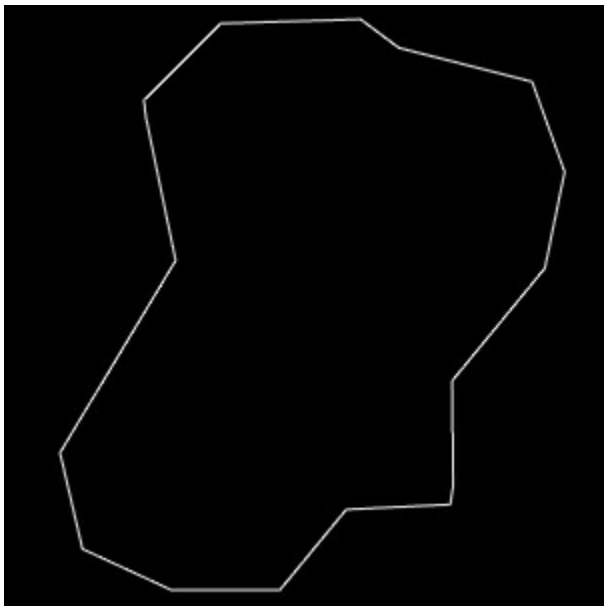
And yet it wasn’t my sisters.

Maxwell and the Ghost couldn’t have done it either.

In that case…

“…Is there still someone else in this abandoned hospital?”

Coffin



Maxwell: The item that acts as the vampire core in the Polish Vampire Princess system. It resembles the standard Eastern European coffin. The ebony coffin is covered in several layers of varnish for water-protection and to preserve the contents. As that story says the privileged princess was cursed by the people and became a vampire, it is unclear why the coffin itself acts as the core of the curse. The details are unknown, but it is estimated that any coffin can produce a similar effect if the same system is applied to it. As the coffin itself has no direct combat ability, even my user can destroy it by using a tool.

[keep watch] Standard Pre-Mission Security Check [from the ghost cat]

Firewall Notifications: 0

Security Hole Self-Analysis: 0

Storage Scan: 0

Damaged File Check and Defrag Recovery: 0

File Competition Data: 0

Wireless Signal Interception Risk: 0

Communication Status: Both sending and receiving have fully synced with the registered task. No suspicious traffic detected.

Standard check complete. All clear. The system is clean.

…

…

…

AE_Lilith> …Are you suuure? ;)

Chapter 5

Part 1

“Mumble.”

I got to see the cute look on the forehead glasses Class Rep’s face as she woke up.

“H-huh? Everything’s all wet inside my skirt… Wait, what is this!? I’m soaked with blood, I reek of roses, and Satori-kun is carrying me bandit-style inside some kind of abandoned building!?”

“Ha ha ha. Are your memories still all mixed up, Class Rep? But not to worry. The scary part is over.”

“Y’know, Onii-chan, you should probably stop rubbing your cheek against her thigh with that refreshed smile and put her down. The view up her skirt is kind of incredible from straight ahead.”

“Wait, you can see that, Ayumi-chan?”

“It’s like a parabolic antenna.”

“Noooooo

momentous occasion. The Class Rep had turned into a vampire from being exposed to a curse instead of being bitten, so she could return to normal if we destroyed the item producing the curse.

…This was an extreme exception. It was nothing but dumb luck that this was based on the Polish Vampire Princess. If she had been bitten by the kind of normal vampire you find walking around, there wouldn't have been any hope of returning her to normal.

I got along with my vampire older sister and zombie little sister…or I tried to. But I was not going to offer up myself or people I cared for. That wasn't my idea of "coexistence".

With the cursed coffin destroyed and the Class Rep safely returned from Dhampir to human, we had no more business here. There was no abnormality on the X-ray screen, but I didn't want to stick around in the radiology department filled with machinery that might not be safe. Who could say what was leaking out of the rusted areas or cracked plastic.

We all left the basement and made our way to the first floor. Now that we were all together, the late-night abandoned hospital no longer felt scary.

Erika opened her mouth once we arrived in the large lobby on the first floor. The lobby was probably used for making appointments, paying, and receiving prescriptions, so you would've had room for a basketball game if you removed all of the benches.

"So, Satori-kun."

"Yeah?"

"…What are we going to do now?"

She was referring to the unseen person we guessed was still hiding

in the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital. We didn't know if they were young or old, man or woman, or even human or Archenemy, but since they had so thoroughly hidden their presence while interfering with our actions, they seemed quite dangerous. I doubted it was just a brave boy on a test of courage who had happened across us and decided to help out. Their actions were just too perfect and it felt like we couldn't even track down a slight trace of their presence.

For example, if someone happened across a fire and ran into the burning building to save a child trapped inside, they wouldn't think about covering their tracks by wearing gloves, wrapping a towel around their mouth, keeping their hair inside a hat, and wearing a mask to catch any saliva.

And today had been nowhere near peaceful enough to unconditionally trust someone who was following us while hiding their identity.

Who had gone to the trouble of unlocking all the basement doors?

I was extremely curious about that, but…

"I don't want to have to redo all this because the Class Rep gets captured again. Whoever it was probably saw that we went out of our way to return her to normal instead of defeating her, so they might think of taking her hostage if they have business with us."

The abandoned hospital's Ghost management program had showed no sign of understanding that, but this was probably a human or Archenemy. They would probably easily come up with the idea of capturing me or the Class Rep before trying to deal with my vampire older sister or zombie little sister.

"Hey, Onii-chan, about that…"

“Yes. When the range of activity is set, like with the Polish Vampire Princess, taking Class Rep-chan back to her home is enough to guarantee her safety, but wouldn’t that be meaningless if that isn’t the case? I bet they would just break into her house and kidnap her there.”

“Oh, honestly! Wasn’t there some traditional rule about vampires not being able to enter houses without permission!?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Erika. “But we don’t know what kind of Archenemy we’re dealing with here. If they’re a werewolf or skeleton, that does us no good.”

“And we don’t even know it’s an Archenemy,” added Ayumi. “It might be a normal human who’s a normal murderer.”

Dammit, that means I can’t relax yet! Whoever it was knew what we looked like and we didn’t know the same about them. So if we let them get away here, they could attack us at any time afterwards. Would we be safe at home? Would our schools get caught up in this mess? Would my parents or sisters be safe when they went out? Would we have to worry about that forever and ever? Screw that!!

“Change of plans. Let’s settle all of this tonight. Leaving anything undone will only lead to trouble.”

But playing a game of hide-and-seek against a single person in the large Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital would be difficult. For one thing, they had no reason to stay in the abandoned hospital. If they sensed danger, they would probably think of retreating. I had Maxwell and Laplace, but our manpower was enough to count on a single hand. I had even destroyed the controls for the hospital’s deadly motocross bikes, so I couldn’t use their cameras now. Even just watching the exits would be difficult and splitting up could easily lead to one of us being attacked. That

was a real concern for an intellectual type like me or for the Class Rep with her regained humanity.

If we were going to split up, we would have to place Erika and Ayumi on separate teams, place me on one team, and place the Class Rep on the other. Any other way would leave us with a non-Archenemy human team and that would lead to either death or abduction.

It was that or search as one big group. One big group was safest, but we would naturally make more noise that way and the search would take longer. And it could easily lead to the foolish situation where the target of our search fled through the back entrance while we were searching from the front.

What would we do?

What was I supposed to choose?

“User.”

But before I made up my mind, Maxwell interrupted with an SNS speech bubble.

“I have detected some concerning movement on a video sharing site. I doubt it is unrelated to the current situation.”

“A video sharing site…?”

The first possibility that came to mind was the unseen person filming us using a digital video camera or smartphone. But what for? Assuming they were human, were they revealing Erika and Ayumi’s ridiculous fighting skill to the world so they would look like a threat? …That might have stirred up the masses half a year before, but it wouldn’t work now. After all, it was just a few days ago that the Colosseum had turned Archenemy battles into a major

show business and broadcast them nationally. Some of it had even swept across the world via the internet. It was true that Archenemy battles were impressive, but everyone was already accustomed to them. And as seen from the Bright Cross's collapse, the current trend was to see Archenemies as victims more than anything. Uploading a video meant to inspire a bigoted negative impression would only get the poster attacked in the comments.

I gathered my thoughts and explained them to Maxwell, but his… no, her response was a surprising one.

"No. That is not the intent here."

"What?"

I frowned. What else was there? Could they be trying to make Maxwell into a threat? Whatever the case, I used my smartphone to check the video in question.

There might have been more videos than there were people on this planet, but Maxwell guided me to one with a red circle indicating rapidly rising popularity.

It was titled "A Round of Applause is in Order".

We all gathered around and stared at the smartphone. It did indeed show the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital. It was terribly grainy and blurry due to using night-vision, but what was being said plainly reached our ears.

However, the focus was not on my vampire older sister or my zombie little sister. Nor was it the Dhampir-ized Class Rep or Maxwell the disaster environment simulator.

"…Then I'll create one."

It was me.

I didn't know who, but someone was focused on me, a human, for some unknown reason.

"I'm already living with Erika and Ayumi. There's no problem there! So there has to be something! The answer is right there next to me; I just need to give it a name and a form!! It won't be a society where everyone fears the death penalty and it won't be a society where you think like you're making all your decisions but even the color of your underwear was decided for you! It will be something kinder, more just, and more normal!! There has to be a way for humans and the undead to get along!!"

But why?

What value was there in this naïve-sounding exchange of words? Wouldn't it be far more worthwhile to introduce the lifestyle or traits of Archenemies?

"Do it, Maxwell. I regret destroying the Bright Cross without thinking it through, but I've still decided to keep moving forward. I won't stop even if it means blowing away that absolute guidance society! So do it!! Clean this planet of that method where someone sits in their throne and looks arrogantly down on everyone else!!"

I couldn't figure it out no matter how much I looked into the details.

But the answer came from a surprising place. In order to view every centimeter of the video with my eyes as wide as dinner plates, I had turned the comments off. But once I replayed the video with them on, a flood of words rushed in.

"Well said!!"

"I've been keeping a low profile and hiding that I'm a yeti this whole time, but I'm done with that. I feel like this new age is one I

can live in.”

“That was a close one, nyah. I was just about to give up on humans.”

“I feel like we can trust this one, don’t you?”

“I mean, he’s the same guy who tore down the Colosseum and rescued the trapped Archenemies the other day.”

“Kyah! I want his babies!”

“He’s gotta be a giant kraken or something.”

“In all seriousness, I want him to act as an international representative. Could he maybe get involved in all of our troubles with humans? Like some kind of ambassador or something?”

“Japanese highschools is crazy! All wizards and psychics! I very very love!!”

“If you can type in Japanese, why can you only use such broken Japanese?”

“That’s obviously because she’s actually a short, bob-cut kimono girl who’s very shy. Open your inner eye and reach enlightenment, Warrior of July.”

“The best part is how he doesn’t choose to support just humans or just Archenemies.”

“For humans and the undead, he wants to reward the good ones and punish the bad ones. Honestly, why can’t all the other supposedly smart people do something so simple?”

“I cried when the boy refused to give up on the half-Archenemy girl and continued looking for the coffin! (sob)”

“Although he is something of a pervert.”

“They do say great men enjoy sensual pleasures.”

“That saying is the perfect example of how the winners justify their own actions.”

“It’d be a little too heavy if he went the self-sacrifice route and asked to be bitten too, so this is about the perfect distance to keep.”

“I want to call him colonel.”

“But he doesn’t have a beret, eyepatch, or cigar!”

“Colonel!”

“Colonel!!”

“Wait, it’s already spreading!?”

…

…

…

“…What the hell is this?”

I felt like I was viewing the commotion from the outside. Was it really me at the center of all that? Being buried in anonymous comments made me feel as distant as someone on the other side of the planet. No, it was as grotesquely hard to accept as learning a Martian was walking around in a disguise that made him indistinguishable from a human. Was that really Amatsu Satori? Where had “I” gone!?

“The video was meant to…raise Satori-kun up as a hero…?”

The Class Rep gave voice to her confusion.

And surprisingly, it was Ayumi who provided further information.

“No. This might be more than just the video. The entire abandoned hospital incident was used to lionize Onii-chan.”

“So it’s meant to gather all the world’s Archenemies around Satori-kun?” asked Erika. “No, it might not be that simple. If they increase his reputation and then make a show of killing him, the shock will be even greater the more people have gathered around him. And that confusion could lead to Archenemies rioting all across the world at the same time.”

Either way, this was bad.

It was a mystery how the video’s uploader wanted the world to view me, but it was only a matter of time before this information matured and settled into the public consciousness. You had to strike while the iron was hot, but you had to let it cool once you were done. That meant whoever was hiding in the convalescent hospital had finished their job with this. They had no more reason to stick around, so they would escape without leaving any hint behind.

“Maxwell! Who uploaded the video? I’m sure it was passed through several proxy servers like usual, but work your way to the source anyway. Do you think you can get through it all?”

“Sure. Do not underestimate the processing power of the system you yourself built.”

Theoretically, no route was completely untraceable. If it was, you couldn’t get data from Point A to Point B. When a drama or movie

said that something had been passed through foreign servers, that was not a technical limitation. It was mostly saying that several countries' judicial branches would be involved, and that was a pain to work with. Not every country had signed international treaties ensuring cooperation on criminal investigations and things got even harder when it involved politically untouchable routes such as embassies or military satellites. If a single country's police tried to trace the signal on their own, they would never find the answer.

However.

Those barriers meant nothing when it came to Maxwell who would not ask for permission in the first place.

"…Fiber optic cable is used to travel around the planet a total of four times and it makes a jump using five civilian zombie computers infected with a remote-control virus, but this is likely the origin point. I doubt there is anything further than this."

At times like this, Maxwell did a perfect job since she was not led astray by emotion.

Meanwhile, I was driven to confusion by the result she gave me.

"What is this, Maxwell? Are you sure this wasn't just a relay point?"

"Sure. This is the origin point."

"You're…kidding."

No one moved.

The divulged name was displayed at the center of my smartphone screen. It came from the contract information for the smartphone used to post the video.

Amatsu Yurina.

My…stepmom…from the remarriage…?

Part 2

At first, I had honestly not gotten along well with the stepmother who had brought Erika and Ayumi with her. She had been too young to think of as a mother, but too old to think of as a big sister. She was beautiful and kind, but that was what made it so hard to judge the distance between us. I always got nervous around her and waited for her to speak to me first, so I had to have been a pain-in-the-ass kid for someone who married into the family. Although she always played with me without showing any displeasure with my behavior.

And my trouble with her had probably been rooted in the fact that there was another woman who the word “mom” more readily brought to mind.

My difficulties with her had vanished for an incredibly self-serving reason: parents day at school. That beautiful and kind mother’s age was hard to judge and she could even pass for college-aged if she tried, so she became the talk of our class and, for some reason, that improved my standing. While the other classmates’ parents found her embarrassing and criticized her use of perfume or wearing a pearl necklace, she had stood proudly tall and created a bright presence.

I had been proud to call her my mom.

A child’s greed is a frightening thing indeed.

…To be honest, it’s the same with Erika and Ayumi, but when I look back, I feel like that could have ended very badly – perhaps even in an outright disaster – if that forehead glasses Class Rep hadn’t been by my side. In that way, I was thankful for having a normal person

as a childhood friend. I was glad I liked her, as embarrassing as that was to admit!!

“But why would my stepmom do that…?”

I didn’t understand.

So even though we had the answer, I began searching for a way to reject it.

“O-oh, right. Maxwell, this only means it came from her phone, right? So maybe someone stole it. They could have chosen it intentionally to confuse us…”

“No. Miss Amatsu Yurina dislikes having to memorize a passcode, so she generally uses biometric authorization: fingerprint, vein pattern, retina, earhole, etc… Each and every one of them is difficult to reproduce.”

“There might be an Archenemy that can do that, right!? Maybe they can freely change their appearance!!”

They were all part of my family, but this felt different from when it had looked like my sisters had turned against me. My image of an adult had been shaken. That was a powerful shock for a kid. During adolescence and during a rebellious phase, you might say adults don’t play fair and teachers are out to get you, but actually seeing it for yourself was entirely different. It was…yes, it was exactly the same as back then. I had believed my family was entirely safe and there was nothing to worry about, but I had realized too late that things had cooled to the breaking point between my parents and it felt like all of those happy memories were being rejected.

The creeping premonition of collapse was enough for me to freeze up. I felt dizzy, I had trouble breathing, and an awfully cold sweat continually flowed from my forehead.

I felt like this went far beyond a sibling quarrel. The peace that supported my lifestyle was being threatened. Would it collapse again? Would I lose it all again? I couldn't bear that! I didn't want to see my family divided up as strangers over and over!!

"…"

Meanwhile.

Maxwell must have decided there was no convincing me with words because she did something else. She selected a familiar number from my smartphone's address book and made a call.

Yes.

I'll say that again: a call.

The melody of a perfectly ordinary pop song played so lightly I could barely hear it.

It seemed to seep out of the darkness and from the abandoned hospital as a whole. But that was enough to feel like the word "home" was falling apart via Gestaltzerfall. It hit me directly in the heart instead of the center of my head. My chest ached like I had stepped out the front door and immediately found a dump truck approaching me from head-on.

She was there.

In the darkness.

"Yurina…-san…?"

I wasn't sure what to call her and I oddly reverted to the more distant form of address from shortly after the remarriage. My mind continued to reject it, but my heart had already accepted this fear. And my subconscious was probably telling me to re-judge my

distance from her.

I could have sworn I heard laughter from that highly viscous darkness.

She was a little taller than the average woman. Her white body had an even more ample build than Erika's. Her long, fluffy red hair was tied back with a hair tie. She wore a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through. That alone gave her a casual look and anyone would have believed it if they were told she was a college girl, but wearing an apron on top of that really made her look like a homemaker. She was a strange person.

But.

That ordinary appearance was what made her feel so out of place in somewhere as out of the ordinary as the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital. Her presence felt even creepier than taking a group photo and finding there were too many legs in the picture.

Just like back then, the look on her face was soft but somewhat troubled and very, very kind.

And she spoke with a comforting voice.

"Oh? You can show your affection by calling me 'mom' if you want."

Part 3

This was no time for a belligerent smile over finally facing a formidable foe. Why was she here? What was she doing? What was that video for? How was she involved in the relationship between humans and Archenemies? I had so many questions for her, but I couldn't even get my tongue to move.

My vision seemed to waver and then I noisily collapsed to the floor. To the others, it would have looked like a guy collapsing from shock just because his young stepmother spoke kindly to him. And the girl I had feelings for was watching. It had to have looked comically pathetic. If our classmates learned about it, I could hardly complain when they gave me some cruel nickname.

But that was my limit.

The core of my heart really had been torn apart.

And because they too were family, Erika and Ayumi understood my pain and exploded before I could.

"What the hell are you doing, you old haaaa

or even continent depending on how they used their powers. And now they had given into their anger and were charging forward.

But.

And yet…!?

“Oh, dear.”

Her voice was as gentle as someone thinking of leaving for the local supermarket and noticing it had started to rain a little.

That was all.

“Wha-…!?”

Erika’s body spun vertically through the air. Her gothic lolita dress and gorgeous blonde ringlet curls danced in a circle after a moment’s delay. And my redheaded stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, didn’t even bother watching her daughter fall. She instead grabbed a surprised Ayumi’s collar as the zombie girl tried to slip in from below.

“Uuh!!”

She then forcefully spun herself around on her support leg and threw Ayumi’s small body into the air behind her like part of the hammer throw.

The two sisters collided in midair and collapsed to the dirty floor without any real preparation for the impact. A horrifically loud noise burst out. Amatsu Yurina probably could have attacked them again as they struggled to get back up, but she intentionally wasted that opportunity. As if to say she could supply a finishing blow at any time.

And the action she took instead was simple.

She turned around.

That monster with a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through faced me where I still lay pathetically collapsed on the floor.

“…Who the hell are you…!?”

“I am Amatsu Taizou’s wife and Amatsu Satori’s mother. I am the homemaker who works part time as a cashier and whose name is known at the afternoon mama’s club. And that name is…Amatsu Yurina! Tah dah!!”

Yeah, right

There was no way she could be summed up like that!

Even if a zombie and vampire were most powerful when it came to infectiousness, they each had ten or twenty times the strength of a human. They clearly weren’t an opponent a normal human could take on barehanded!!

I would have found it more convincing to hear this was a Little Grey from Mars wearing a disguise identical to my stepmom!!

No.

Wait.

She looked oddly young to call my mother. She had the abnormal physical strength to defeat a zombie and vampire at the same time. And more importantly, she had arrived along with two Archenemy “daughters”.

It couldn’t be.

You’re kidding, right? It just can’t be!

“You…”

“Heh heh. Are you trying to talk back to your mother? Are you going through a rebellious phase, Satori? If so, I welcome it. You were a little too obedient during middle school, so I was honestly worried. Now, let’s communicate to our heart’s content via punches and kicks. Can you draw out your mother’s ssssexy losing voice?”

“You were an Archenemy!? Mom!?”

“Archenemy. These days, that term is widely used to refer to the highly infectious undead, but did you know it originally referred to demon lords in general?”

Amatsu Yurina grinned.

And this was a fierce, seductive, coquettish, and dangerous smile I had never seen from her before.

“If Lilith, the mother of all succubi, meets your definition, then I would have to answer yes to that question.”

Part 4

What-

…memories are break-

My mind…can't keep-

"Khah!?"

"Agh!!"

I didn't know how many times it was now, but my mind refocused on reality when I heard Erika and Ayumi's cries of pain. What had happened since then? Either my memories were too mixed up or they had taken too many unrealistic actions because I couldn't sort anything out no matter how much I went back over the information in my head.

Whatever the case, we were no match for her.

Erika and Ayumi kept trying to attack Amatsu Yurina, but each time, they were defeated as easily as taking candy from a baby. I clenched my teeth, stood up, and raised a meaningless cry as I charged toward her. Even now, my stepmom with her long fluffy red hair tied back with a hair tie did not hit me. She simply reached out her slender hand and gently stroked my cheek. That caused something to happen and I found myself spinning wildly like I was caught in a tornado. Then I fell onto my back, knocking the breath out of me. Lilith.

That was Adam's first wife and the demon lord of infanticide and sex. She was a top ranker who had given birth to a great many

demons and brought chaos to the world. Not only was she strong on her own, but she had filled the world with demons on the level of Azazel. And in Azazel's case, the entire world had ultimately needed to be swept clean with Noah's Ark and the deluge. That was the extent to which Lilith could contaminate the earth.

Of course.

I didn't want to believe anything as ridiculous as a major player like that taking physical form and living on this tiny island nation!

"…"

The Class Rep may have been the calmest one throughout. Maybe even more so than my stepmom. Because she was not part of the family…no, because she had seen the chaos of the divorce from the house next door, she may have avoided having the blood rush to her head.

"Ma'am? Does that mean that…Satori-kun's father didn't know anything…?"

"Oh, c'mon, Class Rep-chan. That man saw through it the moment we met: 'Quit feigning innocence, demon lord.' Oh, we had quite the fistfight after that. But I met a wonderful man thanks to it. That dreamer seriously hoped for the coexistence of humans and Archenemies even as he worked as a Bright Cross researcher. That noble soul was just about crushed between his personal feelings and the organization's demands!! Ohh, how could I not find him so very adorable? The next thing I knew, I couldn't keep away from him. Oh, sorry. A woman like me shouldn't be getting so worked up. You don't want to hear me talk about my husband, do you? Oh ho ho ho ho."

She laughed casually, but I dug my fingernails into the dirty floor.

It had happened again. She had just revealed a hidden side to another member of my family. My dad worked for the Bright Cross? He was on the side that had made Erika and Ayumi suffer? I'd never heard a word about that!!

When I turned toward my sisters like a fierce dog on a chain, they refused to look me in the eye.

They had known. Even if just in part.

They had suspected their mom was some kind of Archenemy and that my dad visited that research facility.

I was the only one.

Dammit! I was the only one in the dark!!

"Don't give me that look, Satori. While that man was innocently researching Archenemies at grad school, he was ensnared by a dangerous and exploitative corporation before he realized what was happening. Even inside the Bright Cross, he was part of the moderate faction that was constantly insisting they improve their treatment of Archenemies. Even though it made him an outcast and the much younger members laughed at him. …And he did receive his punishment. When a portion of the Bright Cross's deeds came to light, it created a devastating fissure between him and his beloved. Knowing his own actions had torn his happy family apart was so very, very painful for him."

"…"

What was this?

I had no complaints about my current home environment. I was glad Erika and Ayumi were a part of my family. I really was.

But on that day when my other mom had disappeared, it had felt

like she no longer loved me and only saw me as a nuisance when she turned her back on me at the front door. But my family falling apart had all been…had all been…!!

“How much…how much do the two of you need to screw with my liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiife!?”

I had given up on moving, but now a disconcerting straining sound came from it. I had no idea how much stress I was placing on my body, but I managed to stand up.

Meanwhile, the demon in a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through lightly waved her index finger.

“Now, now, Satori. You are the hero of forgiveness. You’re the hope of all Archenemies who will bind humans and the undead together. Don’t get angry and clench that fist you barely know how to use. Not only will you ruin what I set up for you, but you’ll hurt your hand. When a beginner pushes themselves too far, they’ll end up breaking their own fingers.”

“Shut…up.”

“Satori, if you want to challenge your mother, then either use an openhanded blow or bring a weapon. Look, copy my hand here. Just hold it out like this and focus on shifting the strength from your legs to your hips.”

“Shut uuuuup!! What is with all this!? What are you trying to get us to do!?”

“You have to ask?” Archenemy Lilith actually looked a little taken aback. “The world is going to end soon, so I thought it would be nice to make some rescue preparations ahead of time. Y’know, like building a giant ark before the flood.”

……
……

What?

What, why, what?

What did she just say…!?

“Huh? You mean you hadn’t caught on? But there were so many signs. And, Satori, you were so delighted when you built that big disaster environment simulator all on your own. So why couldn’t you predict something as obvious as this Calamity?”

With her tone, she might as well have been asking me why I didn’t do my summer homework sooner.

But wait.

Wait just a second!!

“What are you trying to start here!?”

“Like I was saying, we’re simply constructing the Absolute Noah in preparation for the upcoming ruin. Oh, and just to be clear, we have nothing to do with the Calamity itself. Also, this is a project using my face as an Archenemy – a demon lord – so it has nothing to do with your father, since he’s a former researcher for the human side. Ever since you destroyed the Bright Cross, he’s been pretending to go to work and heading to the employment center instead. You should thank him for being kind enough to not complain. Oh, but don’t directly thank him. It would hurt his pride as an adult.”

“You mean…?”

“Is it true? Of course it is. Archenemies have existed forever, but

recent reports say their numbers have increased dramatically in recent years. We can't worry about appearances when it comes to boarding the ark. Although I doubt even the undead could survive being exposed to the Calamity." That beautiful person breathed an exasperated sigh. "By our reckoning, we'll be lucky to pick up 36% of the planet's lifeforms even if Absolute Noah is completed. I mean, the insect kingdom of Costa Rica has way too many kinds! And getting samples of things like deep sea fish won't be easy, so I seriously doubt we can get to it all before the time limit arrives. We'll probably have to compromise somewhere, but I want to make sure we find time for the quetzals."

"What about…?"

"Yes?"

"What about humans? How many of them are you planning to bring onboard?"

I had no idea what Absolute Noah was. Was it simply a giant boat, was it some kind of rocket, or was it a vast shelter deep underground?

The earth had a human population of 7 billion. Simply announcing that they were abandoning half of those would likely trigger nuclear war. That meant to divide the world in half and let one side go extinct, so anyone would fight back against it.

However, Amatsu Yurina's answer was truly frightening.

"That's the real problem there. I think it will be a few thousand in all."

…*That's nowhere near-*

What did she just say?

It was true that was the realistic limit of placing people on a single vehicle or craft! There was no way you could place 100 million, a billion, or 7 billion people on even the largest nuclear aircraft carrier or cruise ship!! But…but this would mean…!!

“Don’t worry. Those with a connection to the project are given priority. Satori, your mother is the project leader and you would act as the hero of forgiveness who would kindly watch over all the troubles between humans and Archenemies that occur onboard Absolute Noah. That’s two reasons why there will definitely be a ticket with your name on it.” That demon smiled. “And you can rest easy because the 6.9 billion not chosen by the lottery won’t just be abandoned. We’ll make sure to take genetic samples and keep them in microscopic cold storage, so there will be evidence of their lives. Of course, a double helix base sequence can’t store memories or personalities, so that might be a bit of a problem. But it isn’t like we can’t do anything. Once the Calamity has passed and this planet regains its pure blue color, we can sow those seeds across the land once more. People are strong, so I’m sure they’ll cover the planet shortly thereafter.”

No, not that.

That wasn’t what I was asking.

Was she saying this answer deserved a perfect score with no room for criticism? Was she sweetly whispering in my ear, trying to get me to agree by telling me I alone was guaranteed to be safe?

If so, she really was a demon.

No matter how correct her logic was, she was a seducer at heart. She was someone who placed things on the scales and waited until my soul gave in.

“What are you thinking?”

“About living peacefully with my family. It took a loooot of doing securing enough seats for all of you. But the next thing I knew, you all had important positions☆ As your mother, all I wanted was to get my entire family onboard Absolute Noah.”

That might be true.

Or she might have been using that noble goal to tempt me.

She was saying she worked so hard and stained her hands with blood for her family and she was asking if I would make all that for naught. Just like accusing someone of being inhuman for not crying at a movie about a penguin and zookeeper being separated by war, she might have been using my conscious and kindness as a shield to trick me into doing this.

“To hell with that, mom.”

But this was different.

True righteousness was not cobbled together like a winning hand in poker. You couldn’t add Condition A and B together and then place C alongside them to earn 50 points’ worth of tears. A war movie? A penguin and a zookeeper? Who cares? No matter how emotional it might be, you could grimace the instant you sensed the cheap corporate side behind it all. There was no such thing as a reason why you had to force yourself to cry. If someone felt pressured into crying or laughing because it would seem inappropriate or self-restrained otherwise, would any real emotion appear inside them? Of course not. Then you could find no righteousness from something like that. After all, they wouldn’t know why they were doing what they were doing.

I couldn’t lose sight of it.

I couldn’t lose sight of myself.

I couldn't let the mood carry me away, drown out my own emotions, and make me feel like I had to cry or I was doing something wrong. People's hearts were their own. Even if everyone else in the movie theater was crying their eyes out, you were free to yawn if you thought it was ruined by the wooden acting of the comedian dubbing the voice.

"Oh? This is unexpected. Are you rejecting it? But that leaves death as your only option."

"Yeah."

"Is this part of your rebellious phase? You really were too obedient during middle school, Satori. If you had been a little more wild back then, you wouldn't have screwed up when it really mattered here. A normal high schooler will feel humiliated by the path laid out by their parents, but they will know that taking the easy route and accepting it is the right thing to do. Especially in this case where anything else means death is 100% guaranteed."

What was she talking about?

I didn't care about this Calamity, the fate of humankind, or my position on the ark.

Amatsu Yurina.

My stepmom.

I was saying that the path she had laid out was missing something crucial.

"Because."

"?"

"Because that won't let me protect someone I care about. Nor will

it let me protect the world she cares about. Mom, did you really think your son would choose such a pathetic future!?”

To be honest, I could barely stand and I didn’t have it in me to support someone else’s life. But I knew I had to be standing protectively in front of a certain girl. Yes, my face felt warm, I couldn’t look back. I was pretty sure my head would explode and I would die if my eyes met the Class Rep’s right now.

But I couldn’t back down here.

Not on this.

No matter what happened. Even if it meant making an enemy of a true demon lord, one of the original Archenemies.

“You certainly know how to act cool. It’s obvious you have that man’s blood in your veins.”

Amatsu Yurina smiled thinly.

It was an enchanting smile that seemed to bring out the greatest tragedy and misfortune to test the good inside you.

“But do you really think you can have your way against a legendary-class demon lord? …The time for your rebellious phase is over, you brat. I’ll teach you the harsh truth that nothing you can do will change anything. I hope you mature a little after running headlong into this immovable wall☆”

Part 5

But what was Lilith really?

She was one of the world class demon lords, but she had no horns on her head or wings on her back. She did not breathe fire and her eyes did not petrify. I had lived with her for years, but nothing at all had made me suspect she was an Archenemy.

That was just how human she seemed.

…Virtual reality had its upsides and its downsides. After being sliced and crushed as a garlic so much, I felt like I could somewhat suppress the fear of pain trying to hold me back.

I could do this now. I could.

Or so I thought.

And yet.

Nevertheless.

She was overwhelming.

This was not martial arts or self-defense techniques. It was a seductive dance that sucked all the air out of an evening party.

I did weigh around 60kg. Over short distances, I could run about 20kph if I had to. That might not seem like much, but if I ran full speed into her without bracing for impact at all, it would provide the same impact as a collision with a light scooter. My slender stepmom with a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through weighed less

than 50kg, so it wouldn't surprise me if she was knocked away.

But reality was different.

Amatsu Yurina spiraled around. Her red hair drew a large circle as it trailed after her like a tail light. Once I realized she had just barely dodged my tackle, I felt a soft sensation on my back. Of all things, we were standing back to back. And as if she were pressing against a revolving door, she actually added to my momentum.

I passed right through where she had been, as if I had charged full speed into some fog or an illusion. And I slammed nose-first into a square column.

"Khahh!?"

"Oh, that looked like it hurt. But each blow like that will give you depth, Satori."

Her gentle voice froze my spine. Before I could look back, I decided to crouch as if falling straight down.

That entire solid column shook and a large crack ran through its side. That had probably been caused by the long leg raised to face height. If that had hit the back of my head, it would've crushed my medulla oblongata like an empty can!!

Cold sweat soaked my body as I looked to my hand instead of checking behind me. I glanced at the smartphone screen to see what advice Maxwell had for me!

"Warning: The left-"

That was the limit. I rolled with all my might in the designated direction. At face height, Amatsu Yurina's leg had sent a crack through a column thick enough to support the lobby and this time it moved vertically instead of horizontally. Her heel dropped down

like a meteor and tore into the linoleum floor.

And even though I dodged, I felt scorching pain running through my entire back. I clenched my teeth and checked the screen.

“Warning: The left should be avoided. It is covered with the shards of a broken fluorescent light.”

Dammit. Maxwell’s simulation is accurate, but I don’t have time to read the message and then move. This isn’t a Nostradamus prophecy, so coming up with a fitting interpretation after the fact isn’t good enough!

My stepmom did not make a follow-up attack.

She was also leaving my sisters and the Class Rep alone.

She was fundamentally different from the Bright Cross or the people from the convalescent hospital. She was not trying to settle things as quickly as possible with the greatest amount of damage possible. She was trying to stretch this out so she could enjoy it some more.

Yes.

This was not a professional baring her fangs against a disobedient amateur high school boy. Quite the opposite. She was looking the stubborn child in the eye and showing him what the world of a professional was like.

“Satooori. I’ll play this game with you today, but I’ll give you the answer up front: you cannot defeat me.”

“…”

“It’s true I might be a confusing sort of Archenemy. I’m not covered in dragon scales and I don’t have nine tails growing from my butt.

However, that is the real issue here. Erika, Ayumi, and even Class Rep-chan, who took a step toward becoming a hunter earlier, might stand a chance. But, Satori, there is no chance at all of you winning. Because…"

"Lilith is still viewed as one of the demon lords and some theories say she controls sloth, one of the seven deadly sins," said Maxwell. "But she is also said to be one of the first humans created by god along with Adam, thus predating Eve."

"…Hu…man…?"

"Yes." Amatsu Yurina made it sound so simple. "Adam was created by god and Eve was newly created from his rib. That means both man and woman are missing something and the ritual of marriage is used to make them whole again."

"…"

"But that process does not apply to me. I was not split off from Adam. I am loathed more than anyone, but I also possess the full set of what it takes to be human. Just like a living fossil drifting deep in the ocean. …Hey, Satori, are you familiar with the concept of the Adam Kadmon? It refers to the original form of man or the ideal form of what humankind should be. To wield power equal to god's own, some magic cabals use meditation and isolation to cleanse themselves of the world's impurities in order to reach that state. But since that form was split when the rib was taken and they were stained with original sin, anyone born from Adam and Eve would honestly have a very difficult time accomplishing that. Although with modern medicine extending people's lifespan, they might just barely be able to accomplish it if they continually trained themselves over a lifetime. That said…"

"Warning!"

“It has nothing to do with me since I remain whole and, even if I am wicked, I never once reached for the forbidden fruit. You are an incomplete human and I am a complete human, so there is no way you can defeat me. So. While a vampire or zombie might have some chance…you have none whatsoever since you exist in the same human framework as me.”

The trailing end of her beautiful words blurred.

Hell approached from dead ahead. And it took the form of a huntress licking her lips.

“Wah!!”

I rolled along the glass-covered floor to escape her falling heel, but before I could get up, I struggled in vain by grabbing a piece of plywood lying on the floor. It was probably leftover from covering up the windows.

But her hand easily broke through the wood I raised like a shield. My heart pounded wildly in my chest as I rolled along the floor with no concern for the injury that caused. My clothes and hair were covered in small shards of glass and Amatsu Yurina continued pursuit. She would use her hand or her foot.

Before long, I noticed something.

I was still alive, but it wasn’t my doing. Nor was it thanks to Maxwell. I was up against a legit demon lord who could reign supreme against all 7 billion people on earth and who some theories said ruled one of the seven deadly sins. No matter how much I resisted, there was no way an amateur high school boy could avoid her attacks just by rolling around.

“…Mom.”

“What is it, Satori?”

“Are you toying with me?”

“You could also say I’m entertaining you. This isn’t really the same as a family party game where you grab at each other’s hair, is it? Don’t worry. As a demon lord, I excel at playing the host, so I’ll make sure you aren’t bored. Entertaining a party of legendary heroes is a simple task.”

This was the same as a basic magic trick using playing cards. Her movements were normally far too fast to follow, but there were odd cracks in that speed just before a truly devastating attack. It was for less than a third of a second, but it felt odd, like a video lagging slightly. Basically, it was like she was giving me a warning before she used a major attack. But if I had not calmed down after the blood rushed to my head, I wouldn’t have noticed and I would have assumed it was all thanks to my own excellent instincts. I would have mistaken it for Hero Amatsu Satori releasing his latent talent after being cornered by Evil Demon Lord Lilith.

“Dammit!!”

In a samurai or kung fu movie, the overall quality of the product was just as influenced by the lead as it was the defeated villain and mooks. That was why my stepmom had described it as “entertaining” me.

She was an expert at making you feel that a human could defeat a legit demon lord, that you were special, and that you were the greatest genius. And that would lead you to forget your awe of the inhuman and the necessity of hard work, stopping any further growth and making you grow rusty. That may have been why she was given as a candidate for the demon lord of sloth.

I couldn’t let my eyes get used to this. I couldn’t let it go to my

head. It was the same as the slow and gentle pronunciations in a conversational English lesson. If I let myself get used to that and then I was thrown into the middle of New York, I would never be able to keep up and I would be swallowed up by the deluge of words. So I had to maintain the accuracy of my internal clock. If not, I would be defeated by the inevitable discrepancy. As soon as my mind went blank, a single blow would end it.

I remained wary.

I understood what was going on.

But even that sense of understanding was a deadly poison.

A moment later, Amatsu Yurina had slipped right up to me and she did not hesitate to produce a loud impact at my solar plexus.

Part 6

At first, I gasped for breath.

Before the pain and suffering could catch up, the soles of my shoes rose up from the filthy floor. Then my entire body flew parallel to the floor. I heard a dull and heavy sound as my back collided with the reception counter and my remaining momentum bounced me straight up. Then I fell behind the counter.

“Khah!? Gh, ugh, ah, cough, cough!! Ghhhhhh…!!”

I couldn’t breathe.

Even my cries were muffled.

“Ah ha ha. Satori, this isn’t like you.”

I heard approaching footsteps on the other side of the counter.

“You aren’t the main character of a shounen manga. When you encounter an incomprehensible situation or monster, were you the kind of person to start by clenching your fist? I know you know what would happen if you tried to fight a zombie or vampire.”

“…”

“Normally, you would start by hiding and observing. Wouldn’t you use Maxwell to analyze everything from their actions and environment to their words and legends? You know the value of a life, so you would never step out into the open until you had set things up so you could win. Isn’t that right?”

Could it be?

I had predicted that she played the villain so her opponent would get carried away, but was even that realization a part of it…?

“I might be able to win today.” Amatsu Yurina’s words stabbed into me. “I might be able to do it now. I might be able to cross that red light. I might be able to get this mahjong tile through. …That’s not how it works, Satori. Probability isn’t going to alter itself after the fact to work in your favor. Quantum theory isn’t all powerful and it isn’t going to help you out in your everyday life.”

Something exploded.

It took me a while to realize it came from her kicking the entire plastic counter from the other side. The power cables for the lamps and computers on the counter were torn apart and whipped about. The obstacle was smashed, a heavy impact ran through my back, and I collided with the metal lockers lined up behind the counter.

More than having trouble breathing, I forgot to even cough this time. I couldn’t see what my stepmom looked like right now. My vision was sparking, so I couldn’t tell if it was a beautiful woman standing there or if a horned monster had stripped away her human skin.

I was in trouble.

There was no strength left in my body.

The thoughts in my head, the fear tormenting me, and my desperate resistance may have all been part of some script.

I doubted my stepmom actually intended to kill me. She had said as much herself. She was not even letting me up onto that stage. This was not a fight to the death.

…Had I screwed up at the very beginning?

For example, when you spot a monster wearing a hockey mask and wielding a chainsaw, you can choose to desperately hold your breath or casually call out to them. Had I made the wrong decision at the very, very start like that?

“Gh, cough…no.”

I desperately worked to gather my mostly scattered thoughts.

That wasn’t it. I hadn’t made a mistake. After all, I couldn’t go along with Amatsu Yurina’s plan. I couldn’t accept a future that only saved a few thousand out of 7 billion people! That was less than 1%! Humanity might not be destroyed. We might quickly retake the planet with reproductive power greater than cockroaches. But that was no reason to accept 7 billion deaths. I had to point out that was wrong! If no one else would say it, then I would have to switch the rails myself!!

What could I do?

What could I do from here?

I was not a legendary martial artist and I was not a hero with a demon lord’s soul embedded in my body. To be honest, I would have difficulty even standing up under my own power after being pummeled to this extent. Sharp pieces of the plastic counter were scattered around like glass shards and the torn power cables were lying around. Grabbing those would not be enough to reach Amatsu Yurina, my stepmom. Even if I asked Maxwell to search for the traits and legends of Archenemy Lilith, I wouldn’t be able to use that knowledge in any practical way.

But.

Wait.

What if…?

“What is it, Satori? Are you tired of trying to look so manly?”

The demon lord in jeans and a blouse so thin her black bra showed through had walked right up to me.

She slowly crouched down, bent over, and grabbed my hair with her slender hand.

“Gah!?”

“You can give up if you want. I’ll show you how passing out can feel quite good depending on how it happens, so don’t fear. But as your mother, I honestly wanted to see you show off a bit more.”

“…”

I needed an opening.

Sharp plastic shards and torn power cables littered the floor. To use one of them, I needed to make her mind go blank for even half a second.

“Mo-”

“Mo?”

“Mom…”

“What is it, Satori?”

And.

I still could barely move, but I slowly opened my mouth and spoke.

“15ae89fa33c4eb21ff.”

Amatsu Yurina frowned a bit.

But I did not repeat myself. That would defeat the purpose of it.

“You said this isn’t like me, didn’t you?”

“…Wait. What was that just now?”

“But didn’t it ever occur to you that everything was going a little too well for you? Almost like the entire world was gently guiding you in that direction?”

My stepmom was no fool.

She had all the skill implied by the name Archenemy Lilith. But that was why she would definitely notice this tiny thing.

Had she seen my expression or my fingertips? It didn’t matter. She would notice that my body was jerking to a stop at times. Just like an online video lagging due to a poor connection.

So I had to say it.

I had to give the decisive statement.

“When the Dhampir-ized Class Rep was too much to handle, we placed the headband-style dive device on her head to tear away her consciousness and protect her. …You’re an even more formidable opponent than the Class Rep, so how can you be sure the same thing hasn’t happened to you? You knew my sisters and I had used that method before.”

“Are that voice and your jerky movements some kind of bug or error…?”

With her long, fluffy red hair tied back with a hair tie, Amatsu Yurina remained crouched and looked around with my hair in her

hand.

“Kh!! When did you trap me in the simul-…!?”

The Archenemy’s words were cut off. There was a simple reason why: My hand had silently crawled along the floor and grabbed one of the torn power cables.

“Just kidding.”

A horrific zap reverberated through the room and my own body jerked violently since she was holding my head.

Amatsu Yurina was a true demon lord. But at the same time, she was apparently a human made along with Adam. In that case, her bodily structure was no different. If she was strangled, tranquilized, or hit with an electric shock, she would lose consciousness like normal.

It happened almost too easily.

With no scream or cry, the beautiful demon lord collapsed to the side.

Part 7

I slowly breathed in and out while gradually tensing each of my muscles to see how my body was doing. Nothing seemed broken or torn, but I had needed to use every trick in the book to avoid that. If I pushed myself again today, I was pretty sure all of my muscles really would snap.

Even after I finally got up, I stared blankly into the distance for a while.

What was with today?

My sisters had gotten into a fight, the abandoned hospital's Ghost had sent groups of killer motocross bikes after us while pretending to be Maxwell, the Class Rep had turned into a Dhampir and back again, it had all been broadcast online so I was being treated like a hero by the Archenemies, and then my stepmother in a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through had turned out to be a real demon lord. If I wrote this up as a blog entry, it would cause all of the readers to leave like a receding wave! I was supposed to be the normal one, but hadn't that needle rotated way too far in the opposite direction!? I know it isn't my place to say that, but still!!

I pulled the torn power cable from the outlet and used it to tie Amatsu Yurina's hands behind her back. Although I had no idea if that would be of any use against an incarnation of evil that did not actually appear in Genesis but whose shadow could be glimpsed here and there. At the very least, it was better than nothing.

"…S-Satori-kun?"

“Class Rep.”

I sluggishly looked over while tying up my stepmom and I saw the Class Rep pushing up her glasses while soaked red with who-knows-whose blood. Erika and Ayumi were also approaching. It looked like everyone was safe. Even though this had been a fight between mother and son, I couldn’t help but feel this was a miracle. How many times had we slipped past certain doom in such a short period of time?

“I would ask if you’re hurt…but it looks like you’d have a harder time finding a part of you that isn’t hurt.”

“Fuguu. Just how immature is mom?”

…*Oh, right.*

“Erika, Ayumi. Did you know that she was, um, one hell of an Archenemy?”

“Of course not. She kind of had the scent of an Archenemy, but we never would have guessed she was Lilith. That’s a legit demon lord.”

“Um, I’m a zombie and Onee-chan is a vampire. And our hair color is black and blonde respectively. Onii-chan, you could imagine it was something of a complicated household before we joined with yours, right?”

“Well, more or less…”

My parents’ divorce was not a topic I enjoyed, so I had thought it was good manners to not delve too deeply into such things. But now that I thought about it, it was certainly possible that Amatsu Yurina was a stepmother for my sisters as well as me.

But I could learn all that bit by bit. Erika and Ayumi would tell me

when they were good and ready. And if they never wanted to, I wouldn't force the issue. Plus, there was no need to ask them about it while we stayed in this creepy convalescent hospital. We had done everything we needed to do. We could deal with the rest after returning home.

…

But was that really true?

For some reason, I felt like I was forgetting something. I had been putting it off because we kept finding ourselves in some kind of trouble, but there had to be some mystery remaining in the abandoned hospital.

Oh, that's right.

"…Why did mom come to this hospital?"

She had relayed the events in the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital to produce a reaction in the world's Archenemies, but was there any real reason why she had to set foot inside the hospital herself? She could relay it all just by setting up a bunch of cameras in advance and the Ghost had been fully functional to start with. She could have used the cameras on the deadly motocross bikes.

For my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, we may have only been one of her objectives. If I started getting suspicious here, there would be no end to it, but what if she did have more than one objective? What was the second objective that forced her to visit the abandoned hospital deep in the woods?

We had searched through the abandoned hospital from the top floor to the basement. This place had been used to research a spare plan meant to replace the threat and deterrence system guided by the death penalty implemented by the Bright Cross's Colosseum.

Instead of killing the Archenemies, they would externally control their movements, nip any crimes in the bud, and endlessly tamper with the system meant to maintain order.

…But did my stepmom need that? According to her, the world was ending soon and only the few thousand who could fit in the Absolute Noah would be saved. Amatsu Yurina assumed that the current system would be smashed to smithereens, so she wouldn't need a system to control society. Just like a method of getting a perfect 100 on a test was meaningless once the school itself was blown up.

But what else was there?

The abandoned hospital's Ghost had possessed the Polish Vampire Princess's cursed coffin to test its methods. As the Class Rep had proven, that could be used to endlessly create vampires. …But that didn't seem enough for such a great demon lord to seek it out. Archenemy Lilith was simply on a different level from vampires. It was like making Satan and a succubus fight. And if she only needed a vampire, she had Erika, a queen-class, at home. She had no reason at all to go this far out of her way to procure a vampire.

In that case, was there still something else here?

Something fearsome enough to catch the interest of a demon lord mentioned in holy texts?

"…Wait."

"Satori-kun?"

"There *is* an area we still haven't explored."

That was right.

Back on the basement floor of this hospital, hadn't the inner walls

of the distorted rectangle of hallways been entirely covered in bloody writing and magic circles? There hadn't been any doors and it was possible any entrance had been filled in with concrete. … What slept there? At the very least, it had nothing to do with the Polish Vampire Princess. We had found and destroyed the coffin elsewhere and that had saved the Class Rep from the curse.

"…"

All things had a beginning.

What had initially led the people at this convalescent hospital to seek out something as ridiculous as an absolute guidance society? No, what had they seen and feared that made them think that pipe dream was necessary? There had to have been something. And they had gone out of their way to seal it away just like an unmanageable contaminant spill being sealed up in a stone tomb.

"What…?"

The next thing I knew, I was speaking to no one in particular.

"What is in the basement…?"

No one was expecting an answer.

But a kind female voice provided one regardless. It came from Amatsu Yurina, who had supposedly been knocked out by an electric current and had her hands tied behind her back.

"Isn't that obvious? A true monster."

I didn't have time to ask for clarification.

A moment later, the entire abandoned hospital – and perhaps the entire dark forest surrounding it – shook violently as if being thrust upwards from below.

I more or less understood.

My stepmom had wanted to do something before this happened, we had interfered with her schedule, and because she had been too late, the worst case scenario was erupting from the sealed part of the basement.

There was already no guarantee of safety in this abandoned building, so it could collapse at any time with all this shaking. But that normal sort of fear was the furthest thing from our minds. Something much worse and much more brutal was arriving. And that robbed every other thought from us.

It was coming.

Something was approaching.

Thud, thud. That was all it was: thud, thud. The series of sounds was as accurate as the ticking of a clock and I quickly realized they were footsteps. They came from the elevator hall…no, from the emergency stairs installed there. This fear was far more horrifying than the collapse of the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital. The fact that something like this could walk on two feet was somehow refreshing and almost elicited some out-of-place laughter from me.

No one could move.

Not me, not the Class Rep, not Erika, not Ayumi, and not even Demon Lord Amatsu Yurina.

And.

And.

And.

A smooth silhouette appeared in the abandoned hospital’s main lobby…

[keep watch] Random Conversation Data for AI Learning [from the ghost cat]

The most fearsome Archenemy? Good question. Using the current definition, probably Echidna, Azazel, Lilith, or Angrboda. They all had many children that frightened even the gods. Angrboda created Fenrir with Loki and Fenrir devoured Odin, so that was probably the largest-scale upset possible. And with Azazel, god had to use Noah's flood to reset the entire world. The scope of damage is on another level entirely.

The ranking of Archenemies honestly has nothing to do with how sharp their fangs are or how toxic their venom is. No matter how powerful they are as an individual, an individual is powerless when faced with the whole. In that way, the most frightening individual would be one with the reproductive power to swallow up the whole and steal away the position of the majority.

Yes.

Some of them are praised as demon lords, but when it comes to individual strength, human hunters might actually have the upper hand.

Chapter 6

Part 1

“Ah!?”

A dull shock ran through the left side of my chest and as I sat up. I smelled stifling greenery and felt damp humus. I felt the chilly night air of the forest. The hooting I heard overhead was probably from an owl or something. When I looked up at the sound for no real reason, I saw the pale moon.

…Where was I?

Still seated, I looked all around. At the very least, I wasn’t inside the convalescent hospital. Nor was I in the facility’s courtyard. There was nothing artificial about this place. Only rolling hills of damp earth and a sea of half-rotten leaves. I was surrounded by the twisted silhouettes of trees and about half of those were collapsing from rot.

I was deep in a forest with no sign of artificial caretaking, where the trees destroyed each other in the fight for sunlight and nutrients. The image reminded me of an elderly person covered in bedsores after being left in bed with no one to look after them.

I was outside the abandoned hospital.

I was deep in the forest.

“…What is going on?”

My memories didn’t reach this point.

The Class Rep and my sisters were nowhere to be seen. I could find

no sign of what had happened to take me here from the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital. I couldn't just assume everything until now had taken place in virtual reality. The Class Rep had become a Dhampir and my stepmom was Archenemy Lilith. No matter how unrealistic it was, I had to accept it.

But then what?

If it hadn't been virtual and it had all been solidly real…then had I experienced something that caused me to lose my short-term memory?

"…"

The skin on my fingertips was crawling.

My memories were gone and I couldn't be sure what I had done in the meantime. The calmer I got, the creepier it felt.

I had experienced something similar back when I had built Disaster Environment Simulator Maxwell all on my own. Staying up all night had been the norm for me at the time and I had set my smartphone's alarm to ring on the hour every hour. That way I would only suffer a small time loss if I did fall asleep.

…But once I slept for six hours straight. And during that time, I had apparently eaten and chatted with Ayumi when she brought me a bento.

That didn't mean I had a second personality. I had been myself when I shut off the annoying alarm every hour and when I had eaten the bento with Ayumi. It was just that none of the memories had been written to my brain.

This felt just like that.

But that had been an abnormal situation brought on by working for

about 72 hours straight. It wasn't something that just happened for no reason.

It took a lot to trigger it.

But what exactly had it been this time?

"Erika, Ayumi…?"

I spoke softly into the darkness and then tilted my head at my own action. Why was I keeping my voice so quiet? It was a lot like I didn't want to give away my position.

"Oh, right. Maxwell."

I searched through my pockets and was kind of impressed to find my smartphone was in its usual place. Right now, not even those normal things could be guaranteed.

"Maxwell, what in the world happened? Where did my sisters and the Class Rep-…?"

"Warning: I do not recommend carelessly activating the backlight. Danger Level: Max. Top Priority."

"…?"

I frowned at the message that interrupted me.

And just like bugs drawn to the sole light in the dark, dark forest, *that* stepped on the squishy humus. The sound came from behind me, so I looked back without thinking…

"Ah!?"

My pounding heart rang loud in my ears. They must have been supplying an excessive amount of blood because I didn't have to touch my throat to tell the blood vessels on the sides were throbbing irregularly.

I was still in the deep, dark forest. But my position seemed to have changed. And I must have rolled around on the ground because my hair and clothes were covered in humus and cold, wet leaves. It was as if I had been running away in an absolute panic.

…What had happened?

I felt in my pocket and pulled out my smartphone, but then my fingers stopped. Using my smartphone in this darkness was dangerous. The backlight would be visible from hundreds of meters away. I still didn't know what was in this deep forest, but it didn't seem like letting them know my location was a good idea.

The Class Rep, my older sister Erika, my little sister Ayumi, and my stepmom.

What had happened to them? Why was I alone? Were they okay?

"…"

I slowly crouched down and carefully observed my surroundings. I couldn't sense anyone there, human or Archenemy. But that was not enough to put my mind at ease. It felt like the darkness as a whole had become a giant monster. It felt like a tremendous pressure was going to crush me from all sides if I let my guard down.

Whatever the case, I wanted information.

Earlier, my smartphone's backlight had let something know where I was. This time, I crouched down, dug down into the soft humus,

stuck my smartphone inside, and then hit the switch. It was far from perfect, but it kept more of the light from escaping than before.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“What happened? My short-term memory was wiped clean twice now, so I can’t rely on my own mind. I want an objective opinion.”

“Sure. Generally, such things are a subconscious attempt to reject a fact or existence that you find difficult to accept. This is not a physical change to you brain structure, so do not worry.”

“You’re kidding, right? That means I’m up against something that wipes your memories just by looking at it and it’s wandering through this dark forest without any other witnesses. How can I not worry? Besides, why am I in the forest? What happened to the convalescent hospital?”

“It collapsed.”

I had mostly just been complaining. I hadn’t expected a serious answer.

And certainly not that answer!

“Coll…apsed?”

“Sure. It occurred approximately fifteen minutes ago. On your own instructions, the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital’s Ghost was commanded to evacuate by sending its data into online storage. But the space requirements were too great for the target location and the command failed. The Ghost’s physical engine seems to be contained in a protective shell similar to a flight recorder, but its connection has currently been lost. You said you

would dig it up later.”

“…I don’t remember any of that.”

I held my head in one hand.

I did understand the logic of it. An unidentified monster had risen from the convalescent hospital’s basement and the building had collapsed. Maxwell or the Bright Cross’s Laplace hadn’t been able to leave the Ghost there and had tried to rescue it. With the abandoned hospital itself gone, there was no more reason to stay there. And if the monster that had crushed the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital had been let loose, we would have had to get as far away as possible. It was easy enough to see why I would be hiding in the dark forest.

But.

What had happened in the abandoned hospital?

What had happened to the others who should have fled with me?

“Maxwell, are you aware of what happened? No, of what showed up there?”

“Sure.”

“It seems I lose my memories if I directly see whatever it is. So, Maxwell, I want you to tell me indirectly. …What happened? What kind of threat is here and what happened to the Class Rep and the others?”

“Sure. Explaining it would be simple enough, but I am not certain that information would be helpful for you. I must warn you that I do not currently recommend this course of action.”

“…What? Is it really that dangerous? Just to remind you, I’ve

already seen a vampire, zombie, and demon lord with my own eyes.”

“No. This is not a simple matter of bodily structure. This problem is related to your heart. It is too deeply connected to the very formation of your personality, so it is difficult to predict what internal changes will result from contact with the requested information.”

Maxwell’s roundabout and self-important phrasing left me initially unsure what that actually meant. But once I realized that was Maxwell’s way of resisting when she could not lie in response to my command, the meaning gradually hit home.

“…Are you saying it’s someone I know?”

“If that is what you have decided.”

“Quit beating around the bush. Just tell me, Maxwell! Who came out of the basement! Are they trying to harm everyone!? Just tell me!”

But Maxwell did not respond.

No, she sent a higher-priority message.

“Warning.”

I didn’t wait any longer. I switched off the smartphone to eliminate the backlight and slowly began to move while still crouching. I tried to make as little noise as possible as I walked across the damp humus and next to a nearby tree.

…I wasn’t going to let the same thing happen again.

There was something different about this person than the Dhampir-ized Class Rep or Archenemy Lilith. I couldn’t directly face

them when simply seeing them erased my memories. It was like being pursued by Medusa and her petrifying eyes.

…*Rrr, rrr, rrr, rrr….*

They slowly approached with some kind of mechanical noise accompanying them. Had they noticed me here or were they merely patrolling? I had no way of knowing. I simply tried to keep the tree trunk between us in order to hide myself.

My throat grew dry from tension. My heart pounded like it belonged to someone else. If I shouted, no one would come. Even if I called 110, the police would never arrive in time. This was no longer Japan. It was the forest of some bizarre cult.

…*Rrr, rrr, rrr, rrr….*

I focused on the noise I had been hearing.

It had to be a chainsaw or something. The small engine had been lowered to idling and whoever-it-was was walking around with it held at their hip. It was obvious what would happen if their eyes captured a poor target. My heart was squeezed by a fear more grounded than that of vampires or zombies. Being dismembered alive by that brutal blade would be far more frightening than being bitten by an Archenemy.

I couldn’t afford to have my memories taken from me in this dangerous situation. I doubted I could continue escaping if I didn’t have a plan. I needed to understand. I had to find a way to understand who my enemy was and what the situation was. Only then could I decide whether to fight or flee. The idea of acting rashly frightened me more than anything.

…The conditions were still a mystery, but did I just have to avoid seeing them directly? So what if I did it indirectly?

While moving from one tree to another, I focused on my smartphone. I obviously couldn't ask Maxwell. Activating the backlight to read the response would be suicide in this darkness. So with the screen still dark, I gently held it out from behind a tree trunk. Any middle or high school student would have used their smartphone screen as a hand mirror at some point.

If even this was enough to affect my memories, I would have to give up, but I couldn't make any progress just by avoiding them out of fear. And unlike in a game of chess or shogi, things were moving in real time. The person wielding the chainsaw would not wait around. The longer I hesitated, the more they would corner me.

…*Rrr, rrr, rrr, rrr, rrr, rrr….*

They were approaching.

At this point, I began to suspect they had known I was here from the beginning. But that still wasn't certain. If I gave into the pressure, screamed, and bolted, then they were guaranteed to lock onto me. So I had to bear with it. Bear with it and find the answer. I had to strip the veil of the unknown away from this source of fear.

Still hiding behind the tree trunk, I held out just the smartphone and gradually changed the angle. The branches and leaves overhead blocked out a lot of it, but there was some moonlight. Right now, I could see them. I could reflect them in the dark smartphone screen, and…

"Ah."

Then I saw them.

My mind had erased my memories to protect me, so there had been no reason to seek it out. It was obviously going to do more harm than good.

Thrill seeking, Pandora's Box, the joy of violating taboos. Those concepts came to mind and then vanished once more.

I regretted it.

The smartphone's dark screen reflected someone holding a brutal mass of metal far too involved to simply call a chainsaw. And that person was…

"Ahhhh

Part 2

My memories left me again.

The next thing I knew, I was fleeing at random while tripping and falling over and over in the dark, dark forest. I doubted it was due to peeking at that “someone” using my smartphone as a hand mirror. I remembered screaming afterwards. I must have rushed out from behind the tree without thinking and then seen them directly.

I was scared.

So very, very, very scared.

…They had not held a simple chainsaw meant for cutting wood. It was clearly a custom device. It was held by a leather belt worn diagonally across the chest and a large V-shaped handle like a weed eater. For one thing, a normal chainsaw did not have three rotating blades lined up side by side. Nor would they have a giant crossbow – so big it looked hard to draw with human hands – attached at the top of the chainsaw, the area that would be the back of the blade for a sword.

That was not a tool; it was a weapon. And it was a human-hunting weapon with each part clearly designed to pursue bipedal prey through a dark forest.

If that was targeting me, I was dead at close or long range. There was no point in using the idling engine’s noise to judge how far away they were.

But.

For some reason, it was something other than that direct threat which came to mind.

Would it be rude to refer to her as my “previous mom”?

But these days, the person I thought of as “mom” was usually Amatsu Yurina, who had brought Erika and Ayumi with her.

But that didn’t mean I hated or disliked that person. Even if she had made less of a presence for herself than an Archenemy like Demon Lord Lilith, she had still been pretty for her age.

…To me, she had changed quite a lot.

No matter how kind she had been or how proud I had been to have her as my mom, she was never coming back. The rails had switched over and she was gone. I imagined a lot had happened between her and my dad. They had probably only gotten divorced after a lot of agonizing over the decision. But all that remained in my heart was a hopeless emotional fissure and the unwanted knowledge that even the common image of “a family that supported each other no matter what” could not survive a true storm.

I still couldn’t forget that image.

I could still picture her back walking away after she left through the front door. And I could see the door after she never once looked back and it slammed shut. That was the moment when a family member became a stranger.

Why was I remembering that now?

Wasn’t it obvious?

“Why? Why, why, why,

What did that mean?

Was this the monster sealed in the basement because the abandoned hospital had feared it more than anything? Was this who was wandering the late-night forest with a human-hunting toy made from combining a triple chainsaw with a crossbow?

Was it all my…blood-related mother?

“This is insane…!”

I could understand that my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, was an Archenemy. The origin of my vampire older sister and zombie little sister was pretty suspicious, so my stepmom might have had a secret too. But Magatsu Taori was my blood-related mother. Half of my blood was inherited from her. If she was an Archenemy, I would be a half-Archenemy. But I’d never heard anything about that. It was true Itou Helen the Witch hadn’t been aware she was an Archenemy, but this was different from that. There hadn’t been any hints of this whatsoever. I just couldn’t believe that I wasn’t a pure human.

Or had my mom been bitten or otherwise turned into an Archenemy after the divorce? If so, that was very sad and hard to accept. I thought I was fairly understanding of my vampire older sister and zombie little sister, but I didn’t want them to spread their damage indiscriminately.

“Pant, pant!”

The bumpy forest floor of soft humus was poor footing. Unlike a schoolyard or asphalt, it sapped my strength and I was gasping for breath in no time. The military manuals lying around the internet often said not to leave footprints and not to break any branches, but I couldn’t give things like that any focus whatsoever with a murderous triple chainsaw and crossbow pursuing me from behind.

It was clearly all over once she caught up with me. I couldn't sense any of her former motherly love in the brutal roar of that engine. Before we could even speak, she would slice vertically through me or fire a metal bolt between my eyes or into my heart. Then it was the end. That was the only possible future. That back that never once looked back and the echoing sound of the door coldly slamming shut would not leave my mind.

But using that memory to escape this frightening reality was apparently a bad idea.

"Gh!?"

Without warning, a slender arm stuck out horizontally from behind a tree trunk in front of me. I spun around it by the neck as if I had been hit by a lariat. I didn't have time to figure out which way was up. While I began choking on reflex, someone's soft hand covered my mouth and their other hand grabbed my collar and pulled me behind the thick tree.

It was a bewitching woman with her fluffy long red hair tied back with a hair tie. She wore a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through.

"Yahoo, Satori. How have you been?"

"Mom…"

"Heh hehn. So you still see me as your mom, do you? And that's after the major bombshell about being Archenemy Lilith. Heh heh heh. How cute."

I couldn't move while trying to catch my breath and she took advantage of it by embracing my upper body and rubbing her cheek against me. Her behavior was a bit of a problem when she only looked college aged and yet had been born in BCE times. I wasn't

blessed with a “normal” family due to my parents’ divorce, but I was pretty sure this was not normal behavior between a mother and her son!

“Ugh, cough. Mom…what is going on? Where are the Class Rep and my sisters…?”

“Hmm? I can’t be certain since we got split up as we ran away, but I’m sure they’re fine. First, Magatsu Taori has no real reason to attack the Class Rep from next door. And even if she does defeat Erika or Ayumi, she should take them hostage instead of just killing them. From her perspective, she was driven to divorce over the Bright Cross’s stance on killing monsters, but the next thing she knew, her husband had married one of those monsters. She must not have been able to forgive me for that. I imagine it makes her feel like a fool for leaving over her fierce opposition to Archenemy persecution.”

“…”

“It’s so troubling, isn’t it? She was probably an amateur Archenemy advocate who had heard bits and pieces of information. She must have been a sensible person who attacked your father for working with the Bright Cross, but she was unaware he was shouting for reform from the inside. But the depths of her benevolence must have grown into twice the hatred once it cooled.”

Wait, don’t tell me…

Does this have nothing to do with the Calamity or Absolute Noah?

After all this, is it a personal problem!?

“Whenever Magatsu Taori made her appearance, I knew she would target my daughters to lure me out. In fact, as she is now, she could probably singlehandedly destroy Absolute Noah which is designed

to withstand the Calamity. …So I thought I would settle this myself before I had to be on guard 24/7. Although I didn't expect her to break through the sealed wall with brute force. I apparently didn't arrive quite in time."

A threat to the world and salvation from it.

It was all on a ridiculous scale and I still didn't want to board the Absolute Noah that would smile while letting everyone else die.

But my mom, Magatsu Taori, took things too far in the opposite direction. If something was even slightly connected to the woman she hated, she would destroy it. The fate of 7 billion people was of no consequence. In a way, you could say she was very thorough.

The roaring of the rotating blades on the murderous triple chainsaw passed by quite nearby. It slowly moved just on the other side of the thick tree. She might not have noticed us.

I crouched down and held my breath, but Amatsu Yurina smiled.

"However, Magatsu Taori has no reason to kill you, Satori. That alone I can say with certainty. You can't scream and run away when you see her. I imagine that has been confusing her pretty badly."

"Why…? I didn't matter to her. I still remember being left all alone in the entranceway. She didn't look back even once, the door coldly slammed shut, and that was that. I waited and waited, but it never opened. So why would she suddenly care now?"

"Hey, Satori."

My stepmom held my head to her chest and stroked my heir like she was soothing an unreasonable child.

"What you're saying might be true. Including the fact that I never would have become your mom without that decision. …But, Satori,

was waiting all you did? Did you not open the door yourself, run out of the house, and embrace Magatsu Taori from behind?”

“Ah.”

“She might have been waiting on the other side of the door. Maybe you weren’t the only one that felt abandoned. Maybe she felt exactly the same. Asking an elementary schooler to abandon his family and come with her is certainly a harsh demand. But that was why she hoped for a miracle. Since she couldn’t put it to words, she tried to show you through her actions, but when no one came with her, she couldn’t go back. Couldn’t that be what happened?”

…I couldn’t believe it.

Of course, there was no proof that what my stepmom was saying was right. It was nothing more than a possibility given from Amatsu Yurina’s point of view. But she was the one currently being targeted by that triple chainsaw. Being Magatsu Taori’s enemy had to have made her judgment harsher. Was this really a situation that would lead to that point of view? Back then…no, until today, I had only ever thought I was the abandoned victim and that I had been saved when my new mom and sisters had arrived.

But had that been an act?

And when I hadn’t budged, when I hadn’t moved from the entranceway, and when I hadn’t taken a step out of the house, had she been unable to turn back???

Yes.

That’s right.

Even before the actual divorce, I hadn’t been able to join in and stop my parent’s from fighting because I was a kid and they were

adults, so I had fled to the Class Rep's safe house next door whenever there was an especially devastating clash. But had that been the right thing to do?

It was easy to say what you should have done after the fact. But that had definitely been a small war wreaking havoc on that home back then. If I had made a different decision, it might have ended even worse for a powerless child like me. But could I proudly hold my head high at what I had done?

"Satori. Make no mistake: This isn't about anyone or anything being wrong. So there is nothing forcing you to feel guilty about how it turned out. There are countless forms of happiness. Maybe Magatsu Taori could have remained Amatsu Taori and lived a happy life with you and your father. But Archenemy Lilith arriving with two daughters and become Amatsu Yurina was another option. You chose one of those and you have lived that life ever since. So make no mistake: there is no solution to this problem that brings everyone together in a single friendly group. To choose one means to abandon the other. The answer you chose was like a nightmare for Magatsu Taori, but I'm glad you chose it. The happiness you found while smiling with Erika and Ayumi is a priceless treasure to me. Enough so that I'm willing to turn my back on the world's 7 billion people and bring you aboard Absolute Noah."

"…"

I…

"And no matter how justified her reasons might be, I cannot allow Magatsu Taori to slice it apart with that murderous triple chainsaw. This is a clash between two futures that were split apart by a single decision. Both have their justifications and both have their happiness. So don't think about fighting on that level. I simply want to protect the choice we have now."

This was too confusing for a high school boy like me.

I couldn't even hazard a guess at how many loves I would have to experience before I could arrive at the answer to this question.

Time passed and I still didn't say anything, so my stepmom slowly narrowed her eyes. She was saying that was good enough. Her eyes told me this was a family issue, but it was not an issue that the child had to try to carry and get crushed by.

However.

Wasn't this the same? Hadn't nothing at all changed since back then? Back when I had fled all alone to the neighbors whenever I heard the sounds of something being destroyed in that closed house?

It was true I was a child.

But could I remain a child forever?

Was that really okay?

"Now then."

My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, gently pressed my upper body against the tree trunk. She lightly clapped her freed hands together to brush off the humus and she slowly stood up.

"It's about time I got going."

"What are you-…?"

"You saw what things were like below that abandoned hospital, didn't you? All the entrances were sealed with reinforced concrete, layer after layer of mystical barriers were erected, and she was enclosed in there for more than three years without any water,

food, or oxygen. …And yet she still has that much strength.”

When she laid out all the conditions like that, I felt a chill down my spine. Not even a vampire or zombie would be fine in an environment like that. What had happened to my mom’s body? How much had she hated the Archenemies that joined the Amatsu family if she was willing to mess with her body to that extent?

“She has become such a perfect hunter that not even Erika or Ayumi would be up to the task. I can see why the convalescent hospital couldn’t dispose of her and simply sealed up the entire area. That secret facility was filled with technology and data for fighting Archenemies, but not even they could think up a way to kill her. So it seems to me that this demon lord needs to put her life on the line as everyone’s representative.”

“Mo-…”

I didn’t have time to stop her.

Amatsu Yurina left me behind and charged out from behind the supposed safety of the tree.

“Hey, hey, heyyy! What’s the matter, you withered first wife? I think what you’re looking for is over here.”

“…Found her. My enemy…”

Once again, I could only watch her go. I could only follow my mother’s back with my eyes.

And the frightening roar of the triple chainsaw reverberated endlessly through the forest.

Part 3

The roar of the engine and the high-pitched sounds of clashing metal continued on and on.

All the while, I crawled along as if half-buried in the humus.

But I wasn't trying to escape.

I was moving into the vortex.

I was getting as close to the center as possible.

Not even I knew what was right. If I had a time machine and could redo it, which would I choose? Was it right to run after my mom and desperately cling to her back now that I knew that was a love-starved show? But if I did that, my stepmom, Erika, and Ayumi would disappear. However, did that really mean it was right to abandon her again? Now that I understood my mom's pain and knew it was a twisted misunderstanding, would I feel no guilt for repeating that decision? …There was no way I could come up with an answer. It wasn't a question that had a single answer.

"Warning: Approaching any further would be dangerous."

"…It's fine."

But it was those decisions that had led to my current life. I might have just gone with the flow without realizing the weight of my choices. But even that had led to the smiles we had now. So I couldn't let someone trample on that. At the very least, my mom's murderous triple chainsaw was not a time machine. No amount of swinging it around and destroying things would overturn that

decision.

I had to do this.

I had to stop my two mothers.

I could no longer just wait for her to call out to me and to turn back toward me. I was still a troublesome child to them both and that may have been why they felt the need to do something about it themselves, but that wasn't enough. I couldn't rely on them forever.

I had to grow up.

I had become someone who could protect his family.

"…"

I crawled and crawled and crawled until I finally approached the source of the noises. I could not look directly at my mom who had become the perfect hunter. She was like a wicked sun. To make sure the overwhelming fear did not mess with my memories, I lay on my back behind cover, held up my smartphone screen like a hand mirror or periscope, and observed indirectly. I could tell what was happening in the dark, dark forest.

It was chaos.

First, there was my mom, Magatsu Taori.

As far as I could tell, she really was human. I could sense that some time had passed since my memories of her. She wore a dress long enough to reach her ankles and she wore a cardigan over that, giving her a relaxed impression. Her hair was a glossy black and it fell to her shoulder blades. She had likely chosen against longer hair to retain the part that was still beautiful and supplied with nutrients. And because she was an adult woman with a graceful air

about her, the murderous custom triple chainsaw held at her hip like a weed eater seemed all the more out of place and violent.

She held that combination of a large-engine triple chainsaw and crossbow in both hands and she swung it in every direction imaginable by spinning her entire body around with it. It reminded me of someone waving a large flag around in a parade. Whether the blades were rotating or her dress was spreading out around her, she seemed to be switching the clutch between the two weapons for long-range and close-range use. The large crossbow looked like a siege engine and its powerful bowstring could never be drawn by human hands, but she used the power of the engine to draw it quite quickly. The bolts being set were probably made of silver. But it wasn't just one at a time. Several dozen long and skinny bolts were held together by a band of paper, making them look like a bunch of precooked somen. She then held the weapon at her hip and fired. The flurry of bolts spread out in a fan shape, so she didn't need to aim carefully. They seemed to fill the entire space.

Lilith had parted ways with Adam before he and Eve were inflicted with original sin, so a normal human could not defeat her. But my mom pushed through even that with brute force.

My stepmom who wore a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through would hide behind the thick trees to escape harm, but it didn't seem like Magatsu Taori was actually trying to kill her with those. She was buying time. While my stepmom was pinned in place by the flurry of bolts, my mom would quickly approach and operate the clutch. The large triple chainsaw would give a roar and she would swing it horizontally to slice right through the thick tree trunk my stepmom was using as a shield.

Then there was my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina.

She had no set weapon, but she was the master of adaptability. Or so it seemed to me. She flipped around and all of a sudden she was on a branch located at twice my height. By the time the tree was felled by my mom, she held a broken branch with a sharp point in each hand and she was down the falling tree trunk while jabbing the branches like shooting stars. When the weapons proved ineffective, she readily threw them aside, kicked up a stone at her feet, grabbed a vine from the tree trunk and swung it like a whip, or made a weapon of a rusted washing machine or bicycle that had been dumped in the forest.

Neither side had an advantage.

The demon lord and the human both wielded dreadful power.

They were evenly matched.

It was like watching a CIWS Gatling gun shoot down anti-ship missiles approaching at supersonic speeds just above the ocean's surface. This was not a shield or armor. It was a nightmarish quantity of attacks that had both the accuracy and speed needed to shoot down a projectile with a projectile.

Until now, my two moms had been going unbelievably easy on us.

Now I saw a true fight to the death.

It was enough of a shock to feel a tingling pain on my skin and it held the same mysterious power to draw the eye as a battle performance by experts. Or maybe this was the allure of a beautiful but dangerous katana or magic sword.

Orange sparks scattered between them. Those were lives. It was the glow of lives being scattered in death and agony. I could more or less tell that I would fail to shoot down even one of those and it would crush my head. They were on an entirely different level. If

they had teamed up, couldn't they have destroyed the Bright Cross in a direct attack, no trickery required? That thought occurred to me even though I knew that "choice" simply wasn't possible.

"…If only…"

They used not just the ground but the tree trunks and branches in their high-speed and high-density three-dimensional battle where blinking could cost them their life, but it was that maledictory voice that wore down at my lifespan the most.

It was my mom.

A colorless darkness surged from Magatsu Taori's mouth.

"If only you hadn't been there, I…!"

"You might have been able to rejoin them after leaving?"

She swung the triple chainsaw vertically, horizontally, and every which way, so not even Lilith could defend against it all. My stepmom made a quick backflip to skillfully avoid the many paths of steel and I saw a smile on that demon wearing a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through.

"Don't be childish. It was the kid's fault for not stopping you? You left because he didn't stop you? It was the kid's fault for not realizing the true meaning of your act? To hell with that! That small child was worn down day and night by your arguing and you still have the nerve to force responsibility for your selfish expectations onto him!! What happened to you was a tragedy. But if you're going to keep my son tangled up in all this, then I'm cutting him free of the rusted chains named Magatsu Taori!!"

The murderous chainsaw with three rotating blades gave a

ferocious roar.

“He is my child!! I poured my heart’s blood into protecting my family and my child. I built it all from the ground up. And then you come along, dig up that large tree, and plant your own garden there!!”

“You knew all the effort you had put into it, but who was it that couldn’t speak her mind and tried to get by with a silly act instead!? Satori said he kept watching that door after it slammed shut but it never opened! As his mother, I can’t leave Satori’s future to someone like that!!”

“…!! You inhuman monster! Don’t act like you understand, Archenemy!”

“Then what are you now that you have the power to kill Archenemies like me without hesitation!? Did you swallow a saint’s blood? Did supposedly nonexistent wounds appear on your hands, feet, and side? I’ll admit it’s impressive and quite a miracle. But is that the kind of mother that child wanted to rely on but wasn’t allowed to!?”

“Kh.”

“There isn’t just one kind of human strength that can fight against Archenemies. I really am proud of Satori for fighting all on his own to protect the Archenemies close to him from the international Bright Cross that had its roots in more than a hundred countries! But that strength wasn’t combat strength that rejects his humanity!! It was the kindness to never abandon someone, human or Archenemy, crying in front of him and it was powerful enough to not even hesitate to throw out his priority ticket for Absolute Noah!! The strength shining in that child isn’t something I taught him. I can’t pass something onto my child if I don’t have it myself. So it’s too bad. Since he already had it, I had assumed it was

something you taught him!!”

The exchange of words may have been meaningless. But I felt like things were shifting in one direction. That was how it looked. One side was leaning on the other and the other side was breaking. I could sense that invisible trend in my skin.

My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, had said there was no solution to this problem that brought everyone together in a single friendly group.

She had said I had to choose one and abandon the other.

So if I just left this to Archenemy Lilith, I would regain one choice and the peaceful days that came with it. But in exchange, the other one would be forever…

Could I really do that?

Could I repeat it all again?

Were you really okay with that, Amatsu Satori?

The conclusion was nigh.

If I was going to intervene, it had to be here at this very moment.

So choose.

What was it I really wanted to do!?

Part 4

“I will save Amatsu Yurina.”

“I will save Magatsu Taori.”

Part 5

No!!

Part 6

“I will save them both.”

Part 7

A dull sound came from my side.

“Satori!?”

“Satori-chan…!!”

It happened just as the thoroughly-modified murderous triple chainsaw moved in more of a jab than a slash. I couldn’t hesitate any longer. I moved in between the two of them. My mom, Magatsu Taori, immediately noticed the oddity and disengaged the chainsaw’s clutch, but what had happened? My clothes were shredded on my side and tangled in with the shark tooth blades. And the sticky stain on them was more than just machine oil. Some of it was clearly a dark red liquid with a rusty smell.

But this wasn’t enough to end it.

It was lucky my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, only held a broken branch with a sharp tip. If she had been swinging around a rusted scooter, I couldn’t have stopped it. At any rate, I swung up my arm and blocked the tip aimed for Magatsu Taori’s head. Unlike with a sharp knife, I felt a dull and ominous pain reach the arm bone.

…*Oh, no. I’m not sure I have it in me to even stay standing…*

But I had to say it.

If I didn’t sever her bonds here, she would always be like this. Magatsu Taori wouldn’t have the strength to find a new path forward in this world that seemed formed from decisions that worked against her.

I had already chosen.

There was no changing that. But I couldn't let it end there. I couldn't just ignore what happened to her after I abandoned her. I had to take responsibility for my choice. It was my job to provide the proper care for what I had done.

"Mom…"

"…"

"I'm sorry…I couldn't call out to you back then…"

And I couldn't let the responsibility fall on my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina. If she killed Magatsu Taori here, we would gain a kind of peace. I would resent the stepmother who only unilaterally loved me, I would criticize that compromise, and she would become the wicked woman who ensnared my father and killed my mother to hijack the Amatsu family. She would protect our peace, but she would carry that sin while I enjoyed that happiness as a pure victim.

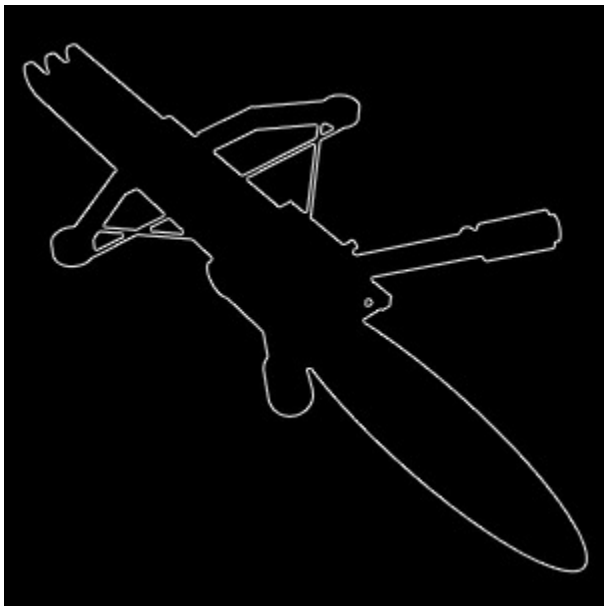
However…

Was that really okay?

Of course not!

…So I would protect my family. I was only a child, but I was still a part of the family. No matter what form it took and even if it was already over, I had made that decision and I had to take responsibility for it…

Murderous Triple Chainsaw: Handmade



Maxwell: This is the anti-Archenemy weapon personally built by my user's blood-related mother, Magatsu Taori. The main three blades rotate in alternating directions to bite into the flesh and tear it from the top and bottom instead of just cutting. And the large crossbow (which is closer to being a ballista siege engine) fires several dozen silver bolts in a fan shape with enough speed to prevent the Archenemy from escaping. The entire weapon weighs more than 70kg, so the ability to freely swing it around like a weed eater is enough to prove how extraordinary Magatsu Taori is.

[keep watch] Transition Progress [from the ghost cat]

Yes, yes.

That was why you had me prepare that distributed format, wasn't it? So please tell me what to do next, miss.

The socket is open.

If you remove the contents of the recovered shell and hook it up, you should be given full rights to the system.

But now it's Maxwell, Laplace, and that Ghost Cat. Using a cat contained in a box to observe the outside world is certainly an ironic setup.

Do you think the AIs will fight with each other? I'm a little worried about that since we'll be placing them on Absolute Noah.

Oh? So that's the point of that boy?

Well, I agree some personality manipulation is necessary before making the final decision. After all, this isn't just about a single nuclear missile. This ark is meant to protect the future of the entire human race. Simply relying on a machine would be too dangerous.

Oh, whoops. I should have said the human race and Archenemies. Or is it more discriminatory to make that distinction? I apologize, but I'm still not used that boy.

In that way, that boy is the only real problem left. Honestly, how did you raise him? Why not read a book on raising kids, Miss

Yurina?

Chapter 7

The next thing I knew, I was in the hospital.

Of course, it wasn't that abandoned hospital. It was a perfectly clean general hospital in the city.

Since I had been hit by the rotating blades of that murderous triple chainsaw, I had assumed I would have needed something like twenty or thirty stitches, but when I pulled up my pajamas and checked my side, I found it was only covered with a large, rag-like piece of gauze. It had been a close shave. That felt somehow disappointing, but it made sense when I thought about it. If I really had been hit by those rapidly rotating blades, my organs and blood vessels would have been torn to shreds. I would have died instantly without time to say anything.

"Satori-kun."

The Class Rap called out to me from beyond the curtain dividing up the large hospital room. My beautiful sisters, stepmom, and Class Rep had taken turns coming to visit me, so the other guys in the hospital room could not stop grinding their teeth. Even my witch underclassman and a surprisingly busty mermaid occasionally showed up. *You wish you were me, don't you!? Ah ha ha ha ha! Ghh!? Laughing hurts the wound in my side…!?*

"Why are you twisting around like that, Satori-kun?"

"I-I wanted to feel like I was really alive…"

"I see." The Class Rep pulled up a nearby folding chair and sat down. "To be honest, there are too many unbelievable parts about

how we managed to get back from that Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital alive. I've pinched my own cheek countless times myself."

"You didn't have it so bad, Class Rep. All three female members of my family are Archenemies and my dad used to work for the Bright Cross. And then my real mother has omega-evolved into a hunter that human society can't control. There's something wrong with a world where I'm the only normal human!"

"I don't think you can call yourself normal when you built a disaster environment simulator on your own and then crushed the entire Bright Cross."

"Wasn't me. It's Maxwell that's so amazing!"

"And who was it that built Maxwell? Honestly now."

No matter what the Class Rep said, I just couldn't think of myself as an incredible person.

I felt like I had regained a little of it that night, but nothing would change the fact that I had abandoned my own mother in the past. Since I had been caught in my parents' divorce and didn't know what a "normal family" was like, I couldn't tell you if all of Japan's families were like the tear-jerking dramas that aired at nine or ten at night. But when I had heard something falling apart within that closed house, I had fled outside instead of rushing inside. I was a coward who hadn't been able to intervene or cry with them, so I did bear a sin there. Even if it was small and even if I couldn't have actually forced my way into that adult problem, I was still a pathetic coward for running away from the pain instead of at least trying to do something about it.

However.

“That’s not true.”

When I told the Class Rep that, she smiled and said something odd.

“It’s true you always took shelter at my place when they started fighting. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing. But, Satori-kun, when you were curled up, sniffling, and refusing to touch the cocoa in front of you, you would always say the same thing.”

“?”

“ ‘My mom and dad fight because I’m there. So if I’m not there, they’ll stop fighting.’ ”

“…”

No.

Wait. In that case…

“I don’t know if they were really fighting over you. My guess is they weren’t, but there’s no way of finding out now.”

She smiled.

From her position one step removed, that childhood friend next door might have seen a side of my family I hadn’t.

“But, Satori-kun, you weren’t running away and you were fighting. Even if that meant abandoning a warm home where everyone was waiting for you. And you prayed every day that your parents would make up. That might not have happened, but I won’t let anyone deny your effort or feelings. Yes, not even if it’s you yourself.”

The small problem of a small family was over.

Magatsu Taori had disappeared, but from the look of things, she would not try to attack Satori and the others again. There was no real proof of that, but Amatsu Yurina was a mother, too. So she understood. Even if it had been accident, the memory of tearing into her own child with a blade would weigh too heavily on her. Could she continue to proudly use and rely on those combat skills? The answer was probably no.

And Yurina herself felt a trembling in her fingertips. The sensation of that sharp branch piercing his flesh would not vanish so easily.

But one fundamental problem remained unresolved.

“Absolute Noah will continue, no matter how much Satori resents me for it. When I brought you to this family, I decided I would be that boy’s mother as much as I am that man’s wife, so I will not back down on this.”

The Amatsu house grew tense as soon as Satori was gone. Amatsu Yurina, two Archenemy sisters, and a former Bright Cross researcher all lived below that single roof. Magatsu Taori’s concerns may not have been entirely off base. A child without so strong a will would have been swallowed by the darkness in no time.

At the same time, it was that boy’s presence that kept the tension in that house below a certain level.

In that way, Satori really was a hero to Amatsu Yurina. His skill with a sword or shield was irrelevant. This was at a more fundamental level. Even when removing the bias for one’s own child, he was necessary to maintain order in the ultimate closed environment of Absolute Noah. Just like a dehumidifying agent in a dresser, he could protect everyone from a torrent of musty malice. And he would not discriminate between human and Archenemy.

Erika the Vampire and Ayumi the Zombie had showed up for the night meeting. It took place in the dining room with the lights out.

The sisters looked displeased, most likely because they did not support the Absolute Noah plan. And so they did not like that Satori had been made a cornerstone of the plan against his wishes.

“Fuguu. We still haven’t agreed to go along with this, mom.”

“Besides, we don’t know what this Calamity thing even is. We’re Archenemies and we’re the undead who overcame Levels 1 through 4 of the Bright Cross’s cruel disposal methods. I don’t know if it’s a war or a disaster, but isn’t it a little too soon to give up?”

When her two daughters frowned, Amatsu Yurina sighed while wearing a blouse so thin her black bra showed through and jeans so tight the shape of her butt showed through. She was Archenemy Lilith. She had likely made countless other suggestions before arriving at Absolute Noah. And none of them had worked, so she had ended up at this one.

“…Have you seen the online news about mass honey bee deaths in America?”

“Fuguu?”

“How about the many seals washing up on beaches in the UK or the roads covered in dead crabs in Australia?”

“That’s probably caused by mold, parasites, or bacteria. They all have different cause, so drawing any connection between them is nonsense. And none of them sound like they would infect humans anyway.”

“Yes. And the details don’t actually matter.” Amatsu Yurina readily rejected what she herself had said. “The problem, Erika, is that

everything living in this world has what you could call an ‘extreme natural enemy’ that will wipe out the entire species if they simply run across it. Because the key and keyhole differ between species, the causes of death won’t all be the same. And they won’t run across it often. But if the key just happens to fit in the keyhole like a randomly-entered password just so happening to work, then it’s all over. The odds are so low you can almost feel the guiding hand of god there, but once it cleanly fits inside, not even the advanced civilization of humanity will be an exception. Just like that, the entire species will go extinct.”

“…”

“God created this world. Including all living things within it. …Does that mean god also made sure he had individual switches to destroy each of those species? For when Sodom and Gomorrah were filled with wicked deeds or when Shemhazai and Azazel descended to the earth, slept with human girls, and produced countless demons. That way he can blow away the earth’s civilization as easily as hitting the reset button.”

Something was approaching.

When the earth was filled with evil deeds, a switch was automatically pressed and human civilization would collapse. And unlike seabirds or honey bees, there was no measuring the effect the annihilation of humans would have. Even without all-out war, the planet’s land and seas were covered with nuclear aircraft carriers and pharmaceutical factories full of dangerous chemicals. …She hated to admit it, but the evil deeds that would pull the trigger were probably the Archenemies. Each time the human race supported them, the hands of the clock ticked forward. And Satori’s destruction of the Bright Cross might have driven it to the point of no return.

Of course.

That was only if you thought of the absolute being known as god as something with a physical presence and accepted that he truly existed in this world. Archenemies could ignore the laws of physics in some ways, but they did not unconditionally accept all of the occult. They would believe what they had seen for themselves, but that was not necessary limited to science and physics. That was the only difference between them and normal people.

“What is…?” Erika gulped. “What is going to happen to Satori-kun and the other humans?”

Amatsu Yurina shrugged.

“If we knew that in advance, this would be a lot easier.” And she said, “We will only know what it is when that ruin has already swallowed us whole.”

Afterword

That was Volume 3 of My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister (etc.).

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Even if it took a different form, Satori was still running around the city last time, but I restricted the story to a single building this time. I think exploring an abandoned school or hospital is a powerful spice that increases the allure of the undead, but what do all of you think?

(By the way, exploring a hospital instead of a school makes me think of Western horror more than Japanese horror, but why is that? I would like to dig deeper into that impression of the location itself if I have a chance.)

For the other theme, I brought the focus on the structure of Satori's family. I've written a variety of protagonists, but I think this is the first family I've written that is this complex and where everyone has a hidden side to them.

As you can see in terms like "third person" and phrases like "what happens twice will happen thrice", the number three has a nuance of "a lot" or "an unspecified number". The Archenemy sisters, the warm household, the Class Rep next door, and Disaster Environment Simulator Maxwell supporting him from behind… Everyone was starting to have their fixed roles, so I was trying to tear it all down and make you question it all again before it became too fixed in place.

I wasn't trying to tear apart their bonds. It was an experiment to

draw out the characters' true allure through adversity, but I'll leave the judgment to all of you. If they seemed to shine even brighter in this book, nothing could make me happier.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. After already building up the characters, I fit them together differently and reconfirmed their allure. I think the driving force behind that came from the lovely illustration resources. Thank you very much.

And I also give my thanks to the readers. This volume moved to a different villain than the Bright Cross, but what did you think? I think it is thanks to all of your support that I had the chance to expand this setting in multiple directions instead of just having a one-dimensional confrontational structure. Thank you very much.

And I will end this here.

Satori is a smartphone-user, so I want to include something like a handwritten memo function.

-Kamachi Kazuma

?

[keep watch] Gossip Found While Analyzing News From Around the World [from the ghost cat]

Forcibly connecting unrelated events and viewing them as a single whole is the stereotypical starting point of a conspiracy theory. I do not normally recommend it, but it can be a surprisingly effective way of grasping the truth if you make sure to maintain a proper level of literacy.

Lately, people are caring less about other people. When someone is arrested for stabbing someone or stealing something, their candid motive is often quite shocking.

And this does not just apply to criminals.

Take for example the Colosseum that the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation ran underground. Then it changed form into a publicly-run nonhuman mixed martial arts tournament under the same name. It’s easy for the TV viewers to say that they didn’t know or that they were deceived, but is that really true? If they cared more about the pain of others, wouldn’t they have noticed sooner that something wasn’t right?

People as a whole are breaking.

The threshold for killing someone else keeps dropping.

There is probably a disastrous line there too. Once it drops below a certain point, society will collapse. It won't be a disaster, war, plague, or famine. The time will come when people can no longer allow anyone else to be by their side. The hurdle will lower that far. And that will mean the collapse of capitalism, socialism, and all other forms of civilization or society.

That is the Calamity.

You could call it an explosion of awareness.

People cannot live all on their own. And this is not just some ideal. Soft-skinned humans have no fur or claws, so they cannot survive out in nature.

So why do they choose to walk down the path to ruin?

Army ants move as a group, but when their numbers grow too much to maintain the food supply cycle, some percentage of them will actively walk into a river and commit mass suicide to put things back in balance. You could say that the human race has grown more than anything else in history, so are they trying to reduce their own numbers?

This is an outbreak of a disease that must not be allowed to spread.

And the people who are happily enjoying the excitement have already been infected. So 99% of the 130 million people must unfortunately be denied access to that boat.

Meanwhile.

The only ones who can resist the human race's extreme natural enemy – that disease known as the Calamity – are those who could feel anger like normal and attempt to rescue the Archenemies like normal when faced with the Colosseum.

Those are the people we seek. Those are the people with which we can entrust the future.

My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister are Completely Overshadowed by the Incredible Thing that Showed Up…Which One is it This Time?

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